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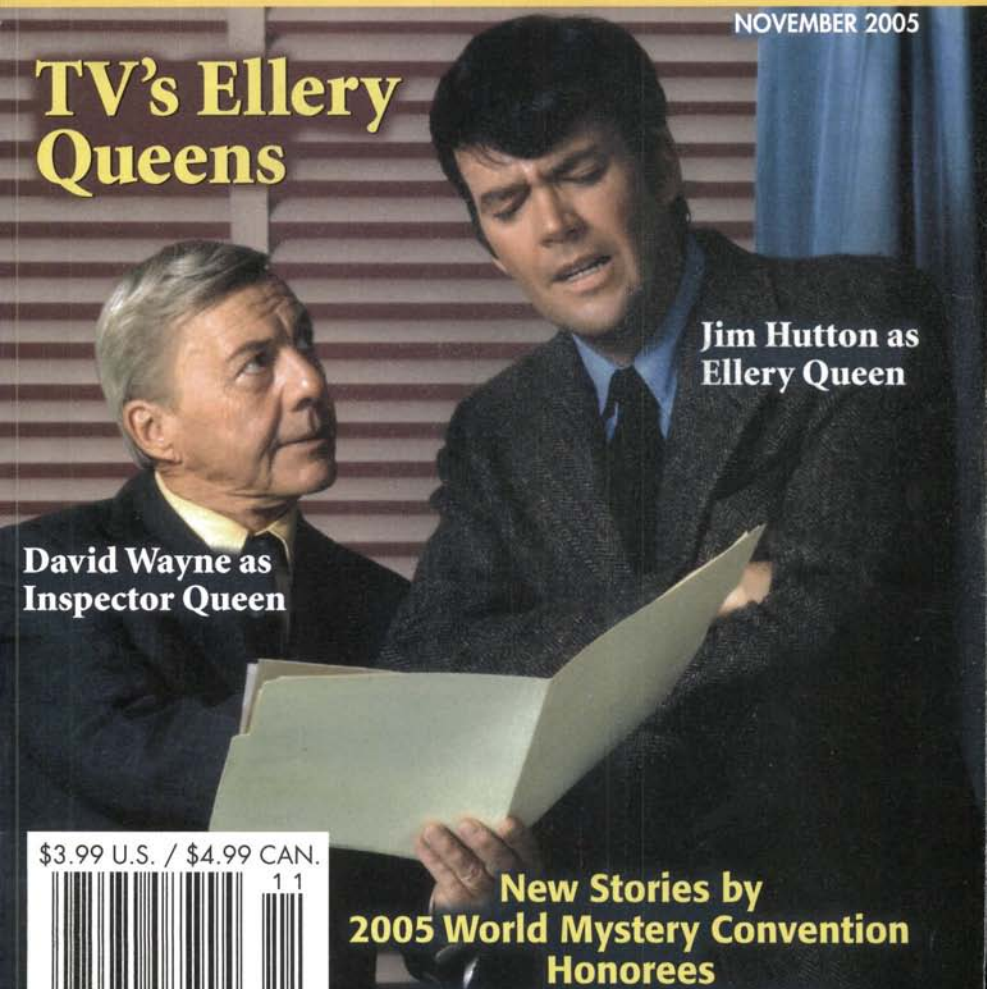

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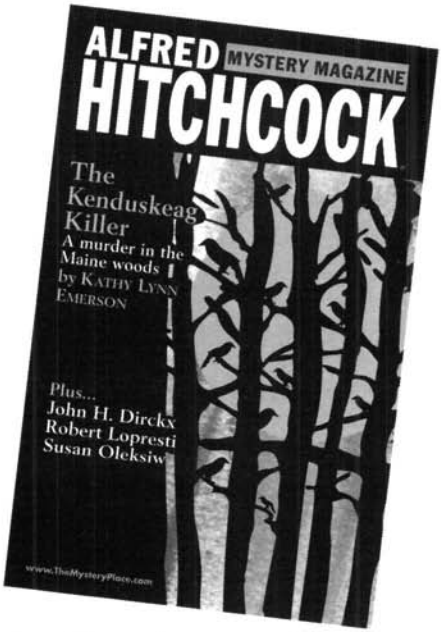

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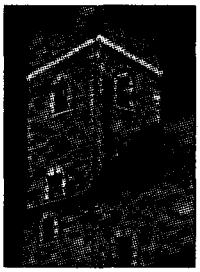

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QUINCANNON IN PARADISE

by Bill Pronzini

1.

It took Quincannon more than an hour to find the shabby bungalow on the lower slope of Punchbowl Hill. The streets had been laid out in a confusing hodgepodge and that rattlepate Fenner's directions left much to be desired. He was in a wicked humor when he finally located Hoapili Street and the right house half hidden behind tall hibiscus shrubs and stubby palms. He parked the hired buggy in the shade of a thorny kiawe tree, wiped his dripping face with an already soggy handkerchief. His thick beard itched. His lightweight tropical clothing felt as wet and clammy as if he had been doused with a bucket of water. Even the grip of his Navy Colt seemed to be sweating when he touched it.

Lonesome Jack Vereen and the Nevada Kid had best not give him any trouble when he braced them, he thought darkly. If they resisted, the consequences would be on their heads.

He paused to reconnoiter before he left the buggy's side. Two other bungalows were within sight, these also roofed with palm-leaf thatch and surrounded by jungly vegetation. There was no

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sign of life anywhere except for a scruffy mongrel dog panting in the shade across the road. The late afternoon was breathlessly still. His quarry were both night creatures, like the vampires of legend; at this hour they likely would be asleep, or at least half-comatose with heat and drink. Both were dedicated carousers. Fenner had told him that the pair had been seen locally in the company of an island rancher named Millay, who was evidently a fellow roisterer—the three of them ruining their gizzards with large quantities of *ōkolehao,* a potent Hawaiian liquor distilled from the roots of *ti* plants. Nevertheless, like all criminals, they presented a potential danger when cornered. It would behoove him to proceed slowly and cautiously and to take them by surprise—not that he intended to move otherwise in this blasted tropical furnace.

This year the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention will honor, jointly, writers Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller. What many of each author's fans may not realize is that these two stars of contemporary crime fiction have been married to each other since 1992. Bill Pronzini's published work includes more than 50 novels and hundreds of stories. A PWA Lifetime Achievement Award winner, he was also the first winner of France's *Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière.*

He adjusted the Navy's holster until it rode more comfortably on his hip. Then he set off down the road, keeping to pockets of shadow wherever possible. The line of hibiscus along the near side of the bungalow afforded enough cover so that he was able to approach it on a more or less straight trajectory. When he reached the shrubs he moved along parallel to them, through tall grass, until he came to a point where the sweet-flowered tangle grew thinly enough for him to see through. Unrolled blinds covered a single window in the side wall. Along the front, part of a rickety, overgrown veranda was visible. He stood listening. The stillness remained unbroken.

Stealthily he made his way around to the rear, past the bushes to where a privy leaned and a grove of mango trees overpowered the hisbiscus with the odor of overripe fruit. The back entrance had two doors, the outer one screened against insects and the inner one open for ventilation. Quincannon allowed a brief, feral grin to split his freebooter's beard. He drew the Navy, walked soft across a patch of grass to the screened door.

It was not latched. He eased it open an inch or two; the hinges made no sound. He widened the gap just enough to edge his big body through, let the door whisper shut again behind him.

He was in a small kitchen all but filled by a table and chairs and a cast-iron stove. The table and the stovetop were littered with unwashed dishes and food remnants acrawl with insects; the two

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grifters were of the type who kept themselves tidy while permitting their surroundings to descend into chaos. At the far end, a doorway opened into the front part of the bungalow. From there, Quincannon surveyed the empty and equally disarrayed room beyond. Another doorway stood at his left, this one covered with a bead curtain. It would lead to the bedroom, the only other room in a dwelling of this size.

Trapped heat made the place a sweatbox; his face and body were dripping again as he drifted across the room. Another smell came to him then, one far less pleasant than those outside. He knew that one all too well. Hell and damn! There was no longer any need for stealth. He shouldered through the curtain, causing the beads to click violently.

Two narrow bamboo-framed daybeds were braced against opposite walls.

One had nothing on it but a soiled blanket. The dead man was sprawled on his back across the other, fully dressed, mouth and eyes open wide; the black-dried blood on his shirtfront had become a meal for flies and ants. Shot twice at close range, from the look of the wounds. Sometime yesterday, he judged.

Exit the Nevada Kid.

Quincannon holstered his weapon, breathing through his mouth, and went to the bed. The Kid's trouser pockets contained a gold pocket watch, the inside lid inscribed "To Harold from His Loving Wife" (the Kid's real name had been Benjamin Joplin and he had never been married), a coin purse, a Barlow knife, and several pieces of hard candy. The shirt pocket was empty. The frock coat, much too heavy for this climate, was draped over a chair at the foot of the bed. Its pockets yielded a packet of lucifers, a long-nine stogy, and two well-pawed French postcards which Quincannon studied judiciously before replacing.

As he was about to re-drape the coat, his fingers encountered something that crinkled in the lining of one of the tails. An examination of the lining revealed a hidden pocket containing a folded piece of paper—a map, crudely drawn in India ink by an unsteady hand. It appeared to be the outline of an island with an irregular coastline. One of the Hawaiian islands, likely. It was not named, but printed in a crabbed hand along the left-hand edge were several labeled X's: Kawaihae, Puako, Auohe, Waimae Pt., Kailua. The X that bore the name Auohe was heavily inked and circled.

Quincannon pocketed the map. He found nothing else of interest there, nor in the front room. Glowering, he left the bungalow as he'd entered it and made his way back along the deserted road to where he had parked the buggy.

The glower held fast during the drive back to the city center. An affront, that was what this investigation had become. A personal

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affront. And he was not about to stand for it.

He was, after all, the finest, cleverest detective in the United States, if not in the entire world. A relentless manhunter with a brilliant deductive mind. He had chased down miscreants the length and breadth of California, across a dozen states and territories. Few had escaped him, none that he would admit to publicly. He would, as he was fond of declaiming, pursue a quarry to the ends of the earth, even into the bowels of the Pit if necessary.

The one place he'd never considered was paradise.

Not true Paradise, of course, in which he would surely spend eternity despite his not altogether virtuous history. But until this case, even an earthly paradise, or what was widely considered to be one, had seemed an unlikely spot for one of his tenacious manhunts. When the opportunity to come here presented itself, he had been pleased at the prospect. It presented a challenge to his skills, meant a fat fee to swell the coffers of Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services, and promised both new vistas and fresh benefits. "Think of the publicity," he had said to Sabina. "Every newspaper within two hundred miles will print the story of John Quincannon's three-thousand-mile quest for justice. Our reputations will soar, we'll reap a harvest of new clients. . . ."

"That's all well and good," she said, "*if* you can find that pair of swindlers and recover Mr. Anderson's property."

"Have I failed us yet, my dear?"

"Not lately. But they've eluded you for two months already, and they've done so in familiar territory. You'll be operating in a strange new world, John."

"Strange to them, too, don't forget."

"Still. There's a first time for everything, including a three-thousand-mile failure."

He paid no attention to this defeatist talk. He was supremely confident, as always. Lonesome Jack Vereen and the Nevada Kid may have managed to elude him in Oakland, San Jose, and San Francisco, but that was purely a matter of faulty timing and bad luck. He'd dealt with grifters and thimbleriggers before, on several occasions; cunning gents when it came to such trickery as three-card monte, the gold-brick, and green-goods games, or the stock swindle they had perpetrated on Mr. R.W. Anderson of Oakland, but also spendthrifts and habitual gamblers and womanizers—traits that made them easy prey for a seasoned manhunter. True, he had yet to discover why they had booked passage three days ahead of him on a steamship bound for the Hawaiian Islands—likely they'd tumbled on a new mark for one of their confidence games—but once arrived in Honolulu they were sure to frequent the same type of fleshpots as they had in California. They would not be difficult to find.

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Ah, the Hawaiian Islands. Eight of them grouped together in the Pacific Ocean, where lush tropical vegetation grew in thick profusion and the sky was a soft blue and balmy trade winds wafted gently over white sand beaches and the Polynesian natives all wore friendly smiles and sun-browned girls performed exotic dances clad in little more than flower leis. Dubbed paradise by all who'd been there, including such luminaries as Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain. A relatively short and restful ocean voyage, on a ship renowned for its sumptuous cuisine; two or three days to locate the humbuggers and confiscate the stocks and what remained of the cash they'd filched from R.W. Anderson; a week or so in which to partake of the various pleasures paradise had to offer (at least one of which he would not discuss with Sabina); and then another relaxing sea voyage and home again to his partner's adulation and the promise of more fat fees.

So he'd thought upon sailing through the Golden Gate.

But not for long.

Restful ocean voyage, sumptuous cuisine? There were storms and rough seas six of the seven days' passage, and he neither left his cabin until the ship steamed into Honolulu harbor nor was able to eat anything other than milk-soaked bread and oatmeal the entire time. He had never been sicker or spent a more miserable week in his life.

Soft blue sky, balmy trade winds? The heavens were seared white with a sticky, sweltering heat, the lush tropical vegetation hung limp and lifeless. The simple act of drawing breath made sweat flow from the pores. Kona season, the clerk at his hotel informed him apologetically. The kind of weather that brewed storms and volcanic eruptions, produced restlessness and irritability in locals as well as tourists, and was believed by native Polynesians to be "dying weather."

Smiling natives? Exotic dances performed by half-naked girls? Few of the islanders he'd encountered had bared their teeth except in panting scowls, fewer still had exhibited friendly behavior and a couple of scruffy types had studied his neck as if measuring it for a noose or a knife blade, and all the young women wore charms-covering sarongs or missionary-induced Mother Hubbards and showed no inclination to dance or perform any other exotic activity that required energetic movement.

Two or three days to track down and arrest his quarry and confiscate the spoils? It had taken him less than two days, as a matter of fact, with the help of James Q. Fenner and his local contacts, to locate the Hoapili Street bungalow—the only positive note in the entire trip thus far. But now he couldn't arrest either of the grifters because the Nevada Kid was lying dead with two bullets in his black heart and there was no indication of the whereabouts of

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Lonesome Jack Vereen or the valuables stolen from R.W. Anderson.

Paradise?

Bah!

2.

Merchant Street, a block from the docks, was a narrow avenue flanked by heavy, square buildings built of stone that had been brought to the islands in the holds of New England windjammers. The center of the city's commerce, it was also the location of the Honolulu Police Station. Quincannon, on foot after returning the rented buggy to the livery, walked past the imposing structure without slowing. He continued beneath the arcades of counting houses and the Inter-Island Steamship building, at a plodding gait in deference to the oppressive heat. Few others were abroad, and the cobblestone street was mostly empty of carriages.

At the head of Merchant Street, he crossed over into Nuuanu Avenue. There was more activity here, mainly supplied by sailors of several nationalities on the prowl for women and women on the prowl for sailors. Nuuanu was called Fid Street by the locals, Fenner had informed him, a reference to the seafarer's term for grog; it was Honolulu's version of the Barbary Coast, a small but potent section that had earned the city its reputation among sailors as a "Port of Hell." Bagnios proliferated here, as did saloons bearing such names as Red Lion, Ship and Whale, and South Sea Taps and spewing forth a great deal of noise, laughter, and bawdy talk. The atmosphere and babel were a taste of home to Quincannon.

Next-door to a boisterous deadfall humorously called Hanrahan's Rest was a two-story clapboard building that housed a sailors' outfitter downstairs and Fenner's office upstairs. It was a poor location for a detective agency, but Fenner was willing to forgo a client or two in exchange for its proximity to Hanrahan's. He had a vast fondness and capacity for beer and owned up to making three or four daily treks next-door for a fresh bucket. If he'd been able to convince or coerce the outfitter to move elsewhere, so he could take over the ground-floor space, he would have been a contented man. But the outfitter was stubborn and refused to leave, and because Fenner was too stingy to hire a runner, he was forced to climb up and down the outside stairs himself several times a day. This made him short-tempered. The Kona season had further blackened his disposition. The sweltering humidity gave him rashes, he said, and not even an extra bucket or two of lager provided him with relief.

For all of his shortcomings, Fenner was a competent fly-cop. Until three years ago he had been a member of the Honolulu constabulary, under the authority of the Marshal of the Kingdom of Hawai'i. Quincannon had first met him in this capacity in 1891, during his stint as an operative of the United States Secret Service; Fen-

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ner had come to San Francisco as a security officer in the entourage accompanying Kalakaua, the last king of Hawaii, who had eventually died in the city. In January of 1893 the Hawaiian Kingdom had breathed its last as well. Fenner had supported Marshal Charles B. Wilson in refusing for several hours to turn over the police station to the new Provisional Government, and this had cost him his job and led him to reluctantly open his own investigative service.

He bulked hugely behind his desk, like a scowling Caucasian Buddha, when Quincannon entered the office. Raisinlike eyes nestled in fat pouches regarded him with surprise. "What, back so soon? Those two *kolohe* not at the house?"

"One of them was."

"Well? Didn't you put him in handcuffs?"

"Not much point in handcuffing a dead man," Quincannon said.

"What's that? Dead?"

"The Nevada Kid. Shot twice and ripening in the heat."

"How long ago?"

"Sometime yesterday."

"And no sign of the other one?"

"Not a trace. No luggage, nothing left behind but his partner's corpse."

Fenner mopped his red face with a bandanna-sized handkerchief, then quaffed deeply from a coconut-shell mug of beer. "You haven't reported this to the police, I take it?"

"No, and I've no intention of doing so."

"I thought not."

"Lonesome Jack Vereen is my game. No one is going to arrest him or shoot him but John Quincannon."

Fenner essayed a grin beneath his brushy moustaches. "You're a man after my own heart, Quincannon," he said. "Smart, hard, and unscrupulous when the situation warrants. That's why I like you. Even if you have become a temperance man."

Quincannon allowed as how he liked himself for the same reasons. And that he was hardly a temperance man; he held no brief against either Demon Rum or beer, his reasons for no longer imbibing were strictly personal.

"I never fault a man for his personal beliefs," Fenner said. He drank again, thirstily. "Why do you suppose Vereen shot his partner? A falling-out of some sort?"

"Possibly. The pair had no long-term friendship, merely a grifters' relationship of short duration. But the spoils from the Anderson swindle weren't large enough to trigger mayhem. More likely, whatever brought the pair to Hawaii is responsible."

"Another swindle?"

"With a much larger cush than they're used to playing for."

Fenner said musingly, "George Millay would make a fine mark."

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"Would he now?"

"Millay and his sister Grace own a large ranch on the Big Island. She runs it. He spends much of the profits, and none too careful how."

"Wastrel?"

"Blowhard, tosspot, and rakehell is more like it. Women, *ōkole-hao,* games of chance. One of those harum-scarum spōrts long on wind and short on common sense."

"Just the sort to attract the likes of Lonesome Jack and the Kid. What kind of ranch is it?"

"Cattle. Prime beef."

"A cattle ranch? In Hawaii?"

"Several large ranches over there. The largest by a wide margin is the Parker Ranch—they run more than fifty thousand head. The Millays' ranks fourth or fifth, I'm not sure which."

"Fifty thousand head?" Quincannon was astonished.

"Thriving cattle business in the islands," Fenner told him. "Has been for nearly a hundred years."

Quincannon fished out the crude map he'd taken from the Nevada Kid's coat and laid it on the desk. "Would this by any chance be a drawing of the Big Island?"

Fenner gave it a quick study, quaffing again from his coconut-shell mug as he did so. "It would," he said. "Kailua is the largest town on the Kona coast. Kawaihae and Puako . . . little fishing villages, if I remember right. It's been years since my last visit to that part of the Big Island."

"Is the Millay Ranch located there?"

"Inland between Puako and Waimea Point, I think. On the lower slopes of Mauna Kea."

"And *Auohe?"*

"A Hawaiian word that means 'hidden place.' As far as I know, there's no village or anything else along that stretch of coast that carries the name."

"You've no idea what it might refer to on this map?"

"None. Unless it marks the location of the ranch road, but I don't see how that would translate to *auohe."*

"Mayhap the gent who brokered the Hoapili Street bungalow has the answer. His name again?"

"Justo Gomez. But I doubt they'd have confided in the likes of him."

"I'll ask him nonetheless. Where does he hang his hat?"

"On the waterfront. Justo's Bait and Tackle Shop—a cover for his shadier enterprises."

Quincannon stood up. Even that much activity in the stifling, airless office caused his breath to come short. His mouth and throat felt parched; he watched Fenner have at his suds with the

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first twinge of envy since he'd taken the pledge years ago. "How long is this blasted heat expected to last?"

"Not much longer. It never lasts more than a week or two this time of year. The Kona winds are actually blown-out typhoons that've come up across the equator and they bring plenty of rain along with 'em. There'll be a hell of a howling storm tonight or tomorrow."

Quincannon said, "Another delightful day in paradise," and went out muttering to himself.

3.

The ships anchored in Honolulu harbor sat motionless on the gunmetal gray water, as if they had been carved from gigantic blocks of wood. The sky, which seemed to have flattened down over the sea beyond the breakwater, had a milky, shimmering radiance that burned the eye. Kanaka stevedores moved sluggishly on the docks, loading and unloading cargo at a retarded pace that would have cost them their pay on San Francisco's Embarcadero. Even the dray horses stood or plodded limply in the sodden heat.

Quincannon felt as if he were melting by the time he dragged himself into Justo's Bait and Tackle Shop. The torrid weather had given his thoughts a fuzzy dullness, but his temper was still crimped and primed. Anything was liable to set it off, including even a whisper of uncooperation.

The shop was small and ramshackle and smelled heavily of brine and spoiled fish. Nets hung dustily from two bare walls. Behind a plank laid across a pair of sawhorses, a man clad only in a pair of dungarees sat sprawled in a rattan chair with his feet up on the plank. He was short and wiry, dark-skinned, with black hair and black eyes and features that proclaimed his Portuguese Hawaiian ancestry. Sweat glistened on his naked chest and arms like oil on burnished wood.

Only the black eyes moved as Quincannon approached him. They were shrewd, measuring. After a few seconds of scrutiny, his mouth opened over as many gold teeth as white in a wily grin.

"Aloha," he said.

"Justo Gomez?"

"Sure, that's me." The grin widened. "Man, you look like you just off some pirate ship. What's your name?"

"Quincannon."

"That brush you got on your face, somebody ever call you Blackbeard?"

"None that lived to draw another breath."

Gomez lost his grin. He swung his feet off the plank, stood up slowly. "What you want, *haole?* Somebody looks like you, dressed like you, ain't interested in fishing."

"I'm looking for Jack Vereen."

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"Who?"

"Lonesome Jack Vereen."

"Never heard of somebody with that name."

"Bah. A few days ago you rented him and Ben Joplin, the Nevada Kid, a bungalow on Hoapili Street. Vereen moved out yesterday."

"What you telling me this story for? I don't know you, I don't know nothing about those other *haoles.*"

"The Kid's still there," Quincannon said. "Dead. Shot twice through the heart."

Gomez possessed a gambler's countenance. His only reaction was a squint in one eye. "That ain't trouble for me," he said.

"No? It's your bungalow."

"I don't own no property 'cept this shop. Somebody shot dead, that somebody else's *pilikia.*"

"Where can I find Jack Vereen?"

"You come to the wrong place for finding somebody," Gomez said, and shrugged. "Justo sells bait, nets to catch fish. He don't sell information."

"But you'll give it of your own free will."

"You crazy in the head if that's what you think—"

Quincannon made a swift draw of his Colt. At the same time, with his other hand, he reached across the plank and took a firm grip on Gomez's ear. He drew the man's head forward, and then inserted the Navy's muzzle in the opposite ear. Gomez squawked like a frightened parrot. He struggled briefly, stopped struggling when Quincannon applied pressure.

"In my twenty years as a detective I've killed fourteen men," he lied, "including two who withheld vital information from me. I won't lose any sleep tonight if you're number fifteen."

There was a pregnant silence.

"Lonesome Jack Vereen," Quincannon said. "You have five seconds, Justo."

It took only two for Gomez to say, "Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Big Island." The liquid voice had an odd scratchy sound now, as if Gomez's vocal chords had acquired a coat of rust.

"When did he leave?"

"Yesterday."

"Did you arrange passage for him?"

"No. He gone on inter-island boat to Hilo and Kailua."

"Why?"

"I don't know . . ."

Quincannon screwed the Navy's muzzle another quarter inch into his ear canal.

"Man, I don't *know!*" Gomez said promptly. "He got some kine deal with rich *haole* own big ranch over there."

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"George Millay."

"You know him, hah?"

"Do *you* know him?"

"Poor bait seller like Justo don't know no rich *haoles.*"

"What kind of deal does Vereen have with George Millay?"

"Don't know. Him and his partner, they don't tell me nothing."

"Then how do you know there is a deal?"

"Hear about it. Friends, they listen, tell me things."

"Any friend in particular?"

"Plenty people see them together about every night since they come in from mainland."

"What was George Millay doing in San Francisco?"

"Buy cattle, sell cattle. Maybe raise plenty hell on Barbary Coast."

"Why did he spend the last three nights in Honolulu? More sport?"

"Sure. Raise hell here, like always. Got cattle business, too, maybe."

"And he left yesterday bound for home. With Vereen."

"Sure, both of them. Gone."

Quincannon removed the barrel and released the other ear. Gomez backed off quickly, rubbing both sides of his head. His glare was a mixture of pain, fear, and malevolence.

"You some bad kine fella," he said, not without respect. "What you gonna do to that Vereen when you catch him? Number fifteen?"

"And you'll be number sixteen if you try to get in my way."

"Poor Justo," Gomez said mournfully. He'd decided to feel sorry for himself. "Always got *pilikia nui.* Wife, six children, police, now bad kine fella like you."

Quincannon went out into the breathless afternoon, made his slow way back to Merchant Street and the Inter-Island Steamship Company. The next ship leaving for the Big Island wasn't scheduled until the morning; he booked cabin passage to Kailua, some thirty to forty miles from the South Kohala cattle ranches.

That evening he spent in making the rounds of the Nuuanu Avenue deadfalls, seeking more information on the relationship between George Millay and the two confidence grifters. He found little other than the fact that the three men had spent most of their evenings in Honolulu's most notorious sporting house, the Bird of Paradise, where the pleasures were rumored to be amazingly exotic and expensive.

He considered a visit there himself, in a strictly professional capacity, of course, and might have given in to the impulse if it hadn't been for the devil's weather. It was too damned hot to engage in any strenuous activity.

Limp and weary, he returned to his hotel. The heat followed him into his room and robbed him of sleep. Later, past midnight, so did the promised storm—a hellish thing full of howling winds and slashing blades of lightning and a continuing onslaught of rain.

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4.

The storm cooled the night somewhat, but as soon as the worst of it had passed, the temperature rose again and humidity rechoked the air. By morning it was every bit as sultry as the day before. Quincannon knew without being told that more Kona storms were in the offing. He could only maintain the dismal hope that the next would hold off until he had completed tomorrow's passage to the Big Island.

It didn't, curse his luck. It struck when the little inter-island steamer *Island Princess* was an hour out from Honolulu harbor, not quite as powerful as the one during the night but strong enough to boil the sea and toss the ship around like a toy, and play havoc with Quincannon's tender stomach.

This storm blew itself out shortly before the ship reached Hilo. Quincannon emerged, shaken and wobbly, as they drew into the harbor. The offshore wind that greeted him was softer, cooler, scented with tropical sweetness, but it did nothing to improve either his physical or mental well-being. He leaned on the railing, staring up at the looming presence of one of the island's volcanos, this one called Mauna Loa, and the small port settlement that stretched out beyond a long expanse of palm-fringed white beach.

The wharf at which the steamer docked looked new, as did some of the rows of warehouses along the waterfront. The town buildings and houses were a mixture of old and new, a few made of stone, more of unpainted timber, more still of woven palm fronds with thatched roofs. Quincannon regarded Hilo with a covetous eye. It was not a particularly inviting place, but it had one attribute that made him yearn to be disembarking here: It sprawled across solid ground.

The *Island Princess*'s layover was short. Most of the passengers disembarked here, a handful took their place, cargo was quickly loaded and off-loaded, and they were soon under way again. The ocean on the leeward side of the island was considerably calmer, permitting Quincannon to remain on deck throughout the voyage to the Kona Coast. The brisk sea wind cooled him, his tortured insides eased. When they drew off Kailua, he felt more or less his old self.

The village was a straggling affair of thirty or forty buildings that hugged the shore beside a protected bay. The dominant structure, Quincannon was informed by one of the passengers, was a royal palace built by Prince Kuakini, brother of Kamehameha's queen. To his jaundiced eye, it looked less like a palace than a square, three-storied New England house onto which had been grafted a long porch and a second-story balcony with ornate railings. A massive banyan tree embraced it; coconut palms and an explosion of tropical blooms shaded the porch.

Quincannon noted all of this as he off-loaded himself and his carpetbag, first onto the slender dock and then onto blessed earth. He trudged to a small hotel that the steamer's steward had

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pointed out to him. The weather was not as hot here, though the afternoon still felt sultry. But the sky was heavy with restless clouds that promised another tempest by nightfall.

The hotel accommodations were Spartan but adequate. The owner was a Caucasian named Abner Bannister, a slat of a man with bristling moustaches who proudly proclaimed himself the descendant of one of the missionaries who had helped Prince Kuakini design his royal home in 1837. Quincannon allowed as how he was there on a business matter concerning George Millay, and asked if Millay and a companion had stopped here within the past two days. The answer was no, though Bannister had been informed of their arrival; the pair had evidently gone straight on to the ranch.

"How far is the Millay ranch from here?" Quincannon asked him.

"About thirty miles, as the crow flies."

"Would it be possible to hire a boat to take me to the nearest village?"

"The only boats in Kailua are fishermen's outriggers. And there are no passenger boats to Puako. Of course, one of the cattle ships from Hilo could take you to Kawaihae. They anchor offshore there, you know, when ranchers drive their herds to the beach. The cattle are lashed to the outside of small boats and ferried out to the main ship where they're belly-hoisted aboard—"

"Is a cattle boat due soon?" Quincannon interrupted.

"No, not for another two weeks."

"There is a road, I take it?"

"Oh yes. Quite a good one by island standards."

"Where can I rent a horse?"

Bannister laughed. "There are no horses for hire in Kailua. The *lios* in this district have either been domesticated for use on the ranches and plantations, or roam wild."

"How do people make the trip then? By shanks' mare?"

"No, no, there are wagons. And Kona Nightingales."

". . . What, pray tell, is a Kona Nightingale?"

"An island breed of donkey. Durable and sturdy creatures, for the most part quite dependable when domesticated."

Donkeys! No boats, no horses, nought but wagons and asses! Faugh! One blasted indignity after another.

Bannister sent one of his Hawaiian employees to make transportation arrangements for the following morning, saving Quincannon at least that disagreeable task. After a roast-pork supper, palatable save for a strange pastelike side dish called *poi,* the two men retired to the hotel parlor to smoke their pipes. If there were any other guests in the hotel, they had not made themselves visible in the dining room or anywhere else on the premises. Bannister was the loquacious type, and willing to share confidences. He was also, it developed, something of a local historian.

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Quincannon asked him about the Millay Ranch, stating that he knew relatively little of its operation or of the family; his business with the Millays was of a highly sensitive and private nature. The hotel owner accepted this without question.

"It's one of the larger ranches in South Kohala," Bannister said. "Several thousand acres extending from the lower slopes of Mauna Kea to the sea. And several thousand head of cattle. Grace and George's father, Glendon Millay, was deeded the land by Queen Kapiolani at the behest of John Parker, the owner of the largest ranch on the island. Parker was an intimate of King Kamehameha and the first to domesticate the wild herds of longhorns brought to the island in seventeen ninety-three, and Glendon Millay was one of his employees. Hawaiian longhorns are small and wiry, you know, not like the Texas variety—"

Quincannon cut this short by saying, "I understand Grace Millay is the guiding force behind the ranch today."

"Ever since Glendon's death eight years ago, yes. With the help of a dozen or so *paniolos* and her *luna,* Sam Opaka."

"Luna?"

"Ranch foreman. Rough sort, half-caste. There are rumors, of course, but I for one pay no attention to them. Gossip is a tool of the devil."

Yes, and of a detective on the hunt. "Rumors about Grace Millay and Sam Opaka, do you mean?"

"Sadly, yes. Neither is married, and they are often seen together, and so the inevitable conclusions are drawn." Bannister sighed. "Grace is a handsome woman. Most handsome. But, ah, willful and tenacious, if you know what I mean."

"Indeed." If any man understood forceful women, it was John Quincannon. The description was one he himself might have used to signify Sabina. "And her brother? He has no objection to her running the ranch?"

"None. He prefers it. He's . . . less tenacious, shall we say, than his sister. Younger by five years, just twenty-seven. He prefers the buying and selling end of the business."

"I've been told he travels extensively and is known as quite a sport."

"Ahem. Yes, well, he has that reputation."

"This may seem like an odd question, but I have my reasons for asking it. Do you know of any spot on that part of the coast that might be referred to as *auohe?"*

"Hidden place? Well," Bannister said, "let me think. There isn't much along that part of the coastline except volcanic rock, black sand beaches, and a *kiawe* forest to the east. But there are numerous caves and lava tubes, some quite large and reputed to extend for miles. Is that what you mean?"

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"Possibly. What exactly is a lava tube?"

"Just what the name implies. Tubes formed centuries ago when molten flows from Mauna Kea cooled and hardened as they neared the sea and new flows tunneled through. Legend has it that there are undiscovered burial chambers in tubes along the Kohala coast."

"Burial chambers?"

"It was the custom of the ancient kings and those of royal blood to have their clothing and other possessions interred with their remains. The locations were kept secret for privacy reasons— Ah! That reminds me. Just south of the Millay Ranch road, near Waimea Point, there is an inlet where an old *heiau* once stood. I suppose it might also be considered a hidden place."

"And what is a *heiau?*"

"A Hawaiian temple," Bannister said. "After a volcanic eruption destroyed part of the low cliffs there long ago, a *kahuna pule*—a high priest—ordered a temple built on the site. Grass huts that housed various wooden idols, stone altar platforms where sacrifices were offered to the gods. The early missionaries had the huts and idols burned. No one goes to the ruins."

"No? Why is that?"

"Natives are superstitious and *heiaus* were forbidden, taboo. The ruins can also be dangerous at high tide. The rocks there are unstable and there is rather a large *puka* in the ledge there. Blowhole, you know."

Quincannon let the conversation lapse. Danger was his life's blood. And if there was anything hidden among the *heiau's* ruins, he would find it.

5.

He left Kailua shortly past dawn the next morning. It had stormed again during the night, but at this hour the sky was mostly clear and the offshore wind comfortably warm. Only the ever-present humid stickiness suggested another blistering day ahead. The hired wagon was little more than a wooden cart with iron wheels, but its bed was large enough to hold a trussed prisoner on the return trip; now it contained only his carpetbag and a basket of food provided by Abner Bannister. As for the creature in the traces, he had never seen one quite like it. It was smaller than the asses he was used to, and resembled nothing so much as a leathery-skinned mouse grown to fifty times its normal size. He had eyed it sceptically on first encounter; it seemed incapable of either the stamina for a thirty-mile trip or the ability to move along at any but a retarded speed. The impression, at least in the early stages of the trek, had proved false. The animal trotted along the muddy, rutted road with no evident strain and at a steady pace.

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Kailua lay in lowlands dominated by vast plantations of coffee and sugar cane.

The road ran on a more or less level grade through the fields, then began to skirt the edges of inland hills grayed by volcanic ash. Ancient lava flows from Mauna Kea had permanently scarred the landscape, leaving humped, blackened rocks to mark their path to the sea. The volcano loomed high to the east, its snow-covered crest sheathed and mostly hidden by clouds.

By nine o'clock the heat had gathered and begun to lay heavy on Quincannon's head and shoulders. He donned the planter's hat Bannister had provided for a nominal fee, took frequent sips from a water bottle. He stopped once to give the Kona Nightingale a drink and a bait of grain, using his hat for a bowl; otherwise the donkey plodded along without apparent need for rest.

Shortly past eleven by his stemwinder they crested a hill, from where he could see a considerable distance along the rugged coast. Huge blackened lava swaths cut through the greens and browns; some of the beaches were of black sand, an oddly unreal sight with their fringes of coconut palms. Where the road descended near one of these, he stopped again and sought shade under one of the palms in which to partake of the sandwiches and fruit Bannister had packed for him.

The day wore on. Mile after mile jolted away. He passed a hamlet of grass shacks and a handful of wagons driven by native Hawaiians, saw no one else. Sunflame and the dusty, sultry air turned his disposition as black and bleak as the lava scars. There would come a day when he would look back on this adventure as an example of the ends to which a great manhunter would go to bring his quarry to justice, and regale Sabina with descriptions of his many tropical hardships. But that day was far off.

He reached the old temple in early afternoon, though he would not have recognized it as such if it hadn't been for a pair of landmarks provided by Abner Bannister—a stunted kukui tree growing atilt between two spirelike rocks and the arrowhead-shaped ledge jutting out into the sea. There may have been cliffs here at one time, but molten lava had flattened them down into a long, wide slope ridged and humped and strewn with huge boulders. From the road he could see the blowhole in the ledge's outer end, and below that a sandy beach neither black nor white but a dark gray. A strong offshore wind blew here and the sea had roughened; tidewater mixed with air boiled into the seaward end of what Bannister had described as a funnellike tube beneath the ledge, and sent spray geysering a hundred feet into the air. The falling water drenched the rocks there and made them glisten like black glass.

Quincannon tied the donkey to the kukui tree. An ancient trail leading down to the temple was nearby, but it took him awhile to

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find it. The descent was gradual, but the sharp-edged lava rock made for poor footing and slow progress. As he neared the ledge, the roar and gurgle of the spouting blowhole was thunderous. A flattish, inland extension of the ledge led in among the overhanging rocks. There, hidden from the road, was where he found the ruins of the *heiau.*

All that remained standing were sections of the outer walls. Forbidden entry, Bannister had told him. Bah. Ancient superstitions meant nothing to Quincannon, or nothing to which he would admit in the light of day. He found a passage between two of the sections, followed it into an open expanse some fifty rods in diameter. The floor was uneven, littered with sharp rocks. Flat volcanic slabs, cracked and broken, were arranged at its rear—the ancient sacrificial stones. There was no sign of the huts or idols that had once been displayed here.

He prowled the *heiau* for a time, finding nothing to have inspired the crude map or the murder of the Nevada Kid. There were several narrow, tight-fitting openings into the maze of rocks, one or more of which might have been manmade, but attempting to explore them with no more than a packet of lucifers was a fool's errand. He would need a lantern or a supply of candles for that chore. And it might not be necessary. Wouldn't be if he could get his hands on Lonesome Jack Vereen without incident at the Millay Ranch.

He climbed back up to the road, gigged the Kona Nightingale into a fresh trot. It was a short distance to where the ranch road, marked by a weathered sign and a track worn smooth by countless wheels and hooves, wound upward through a desolate landscape toward the brooding presence of the volcano. The ascent was sharp and steady, curling through lava beds where the wagon's wheels churned up a black powdery grit that clogged Quincannon's nostrils and streaked his sweating face. Then it passed through the *kiawe* forest, a long jungly stretch in which the trees, none more than a dozen feet in height, were so closely packed that their bare, thorn-laden branches had interlocked to form an impassable tangle on both sides of the road.

Once he emerged from the forest, the grasslands began. The wind that blew at this higher elevation was cooler by several degrees and carried the smell of grass and mountain instead of the sea. Quincannon's spirits rose. The lethargy produced by the long, hot ride began to give way.

Eventually, the road debouched into a small, verdant valley. The pastureland here was spotted with longhorn cattle, lean and somewhat stunted by comparison to the burly beeves raised on mainland ranches. At the far end, set into a half-circle of trees, he spied the ranch buildings. He sat more erect on the hard seat, smiling thinly in anticipation. The prospect of action always had a limber-

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ing effect on his liver.

The ranch house, he saw as he drew near, was a long, low structure of native lumber with hand-squared log walls and a palm-thatch roof, its porch, open on three sides, green-shadowed by the branches of a huge monkeypod tree. The visible windows had glass panes that caught the lowering rays of the sun and threw back a fiery dazzle. A corral made of thick bamboo poles stretched behind the house. Several outbuildings were also visible, among them stable, dairy barn, and what was likely a bunkhouse for the hands.

Two rough-garbed Hawaiian cowboys were working a pair of horses inside the corral, both animals small and wiry like Indian mustangs and marked with white pinto splotches. Another *paniolo* stood inside the open doors to a blacksmith's shop next to the stable, using a pair of heavy nippers on another horse's hoof. There was no sign of anyone at the main house.

Quincannon drew up at the far end of the yard, nearer the stable. The two *paniolos* in the corral stopped their work and came over to stand silently watching from the fence. The one in the smithy looked up but didn't lower either the nippers or his animal's hoof as Quincannon approached him.

The cowhand was middle-aged, sinewy, with an expressionless face sunburnt to the hue of old mahogany. Quincannon stopped at a sidewise angle in the doorway, so that he could see the corral and house beyond.

"Aloha," he said. This seemed to be the standard islands greeting. "You wouldn't be the *luna,* by any chance? Sam Opaka?"

"No. You want Sam?"

"My business is with Jack Vereen."

The name produced no reaction. The *paniolo* finished cutting away heavy cartilage, then picked up a wood rasp to smooth the edges and keep the hoof from splitting. "Don't know him."

"George Millay's friend from the mainland. Just arrived."

"Mr. Millay got no *haole* friend here."

"No? Mr. Millay is here, isn't he?"

"Come back yesterday. Away long time."

"Are you saying he came back alone?"

"Alone. Sure."

Quincannon stared at him. What the devil was this, now? A lie or evasion, for some reason? If it was the truth, where was Lonesome Jack Vereen?

6.

Scowling, he asked, "Where would I find Mr. Millay?"

"Main house, maybe."

"And his sister?"

"She out riding with Sam Opaka. Back pretty soon now."

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Quincannon left him to his chore and crossed the yard to the ranch house. It was almost cool in the shade of the monkeypod. The front door stood open behind a flyscreen; he knocked on the screen's frame. When this produced no response, he used the heel of his hand to make a louder summons.

A voice from the gloom within called out thickly, "Mele! See who that is!"

Quincannon waited. After a minute, when no one appeared, he pounded on the frame again.

"Mele!" Then, "Dammit, who's making all that racket out there?"

"George Millay?"

". . . I don't want to see anybody. Go away."

Quincannon did the opposite: He opened the screen and stepped inside.

Once his eyes grew accustomed to the half-light, he saw that he was in a large room whose rough-hewn walls were decorated with tapa cloth and an assortment of pagan objects—carved idols, feathered fetishes, calabashes made from coconut husks, notched war clubs, a pair of crossed spears with polished wood shafts and ivory barbs. Woven mats covered the floor; the furniture was of native timber and bamboo. In one of the chairs a big man, young and ginger-haired, sat slumped on his spine with a glass propped on his chest. Judging from the bleary squint he directed at Quincannon, the glass contained *okolehao* or its equivalent and had been emptied and refilled several times.

"Who in blazes are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Quincannon."

"Quincannon? Scotsman, eh? I don't know any Scotsmen. Get out of my house."

"Not until I have what I came here for."

"And just what would that be?"

"Jack Vereen."

The name produced a twitch that nearly upset Millay's glass. "Don't know anybody by that name."

"No? You crossed the ocean from San Francisco with Vereen and his partner, Ben Joplin. Spent three nights carousing with them in Honolulu. Came here with Vereen yesterday."

"By Christ!" The exclamation startled the young Hawaiian girl, barefoot and dressed in a flowered sarong, who had just entered the room. "I don't want you anymore, Mele," Millay snapped at her, and immediately she disappeared again. Then he said to Quincannon, "Casual companions, no more. What's your interest in them? Who the devil are you?"

Quincannon produced one of his business cards, laid it on the arm of Millay's chair. The rancher picked it up, squinted at it, and twitched again. He fortified himself with a deep draught from his

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glass before he said, "Detective? What's Vereen done to bring a detective all the way from San Francisco?"

"He's a notorious flimflammer. His partner likewise. But then, I expect you know that by now."

"How would I know it? I had no business dealings with them."

"Where is Vereen now, Mr. Millay?"

"No idea. In Hilo, I suppose. That's where I saw him last."

"The gent who runs the hotel in Kailua states otherwise," Quincannon said. "He contends Vereen was with you when you arrived two days ago."

"Bannister? The man is half-blind and mostly senile. I was the only passenger to disembark at Kailua."

"If you're hiding Vereen on this ranch, you're guilty of aiding and abetting a fugitive."

"Hiding him? Why would I do that?"

"Why indeed."

"Well, I'm not. Does he know you're after him?"

"If he doesn't, he soon will. I've come three thousand miles to take him prisoner and I won't leave until I do."

"By God, search the house if you like. Search the entire ranch. You won't find a trace of the man because he was never here."

Quincannon said, "You haven't asked about his partner."

". . . What's that?"

"Vereen's partner. Ben Joplin, also known as the Nevada Kid. Where did you see him last? In their bungalow in Honolulu, mayhap?"

"No. I never went to their lodgings."

"Fortunate for you, if that's the truth. Joplin was shot to death there three nights ago."

In convulsive movements Millay drained his glass, slammed it down on a side table, and shoved onto his feet. "I don't know what you're talking about." The bluster was still in his voice, but it was underlain now by strong currents of fear. "And I've heard enough about matters that don't concern me. Either you rattle your hocks out of here, or I'll throw you out."

Quincannon's answer to that was a feral grin. In the tense moment which followed, there was the sudden pounding of boots on the porch outside. Two pairs, one heavy, one light. A woman's voice called, "George? Are you in here?" just before the screen door clattered open.

Quincannon moved a few paces to one side as the newcomers entered the room. The woman, in the lead, was an older, slimmer version of Millay—fair-skinned, her sun-bleached hair tucked inside a cowboy hat decorated by a flower *lei.* The hard-eyed man behind her was native-dark, bulky, dressed as she was in rough range garb. Grace Millay and Sam Opaka.

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The woman glanced at Quincannon, said to her brother, "Kolea told me we have company. Who is this man?"

"His name's Quincannon," Millay said. He seemed somewhat calmer now that reinforcements had arrived, but no less defensive or truculent. "Detective from San Francisco. He thinks we're harboring one of the pair of swells I met on shipboard, supposed to be a confidence man."

"Lonesome Jack Vereen," Quincannon said.

"I told him I returned home alone yesterday. He doesn't believe me." To Quincannon he said, "This is my sister, Grace. And our foreman, Sam Opaka. Go ahead, ask them."

"He's telling the truth," Grace Millay said. Opaka said nothing; but his eyes, black and hard as volcanic rock, never left Quincannon's face. "There is no one on this ranch named Vereen. Nor has there ever been."

"Nor in Kailua, according to your brother," Quincannon said. "Abner Bannister tells a different tale."

Millay said, "I don't care what that old fool Bannister says. The last I saw of Jack Vereen was five minutes after the inter-island boat docked at Hilo. He was meeting someone there, he said."

"Did he, now? And who might that someone be?"

"He didn't confide in me. And I didn't ask. I keep my nose out of other men's business."

"You seem to have come a far distance for nothing, Mr. Quincannon," Grace Millay said. "It appears your man is somewhere in Hilo."

"Perhaps. And perhaps not."

"Are you calling us liars?" Millay growled. He had picked up a decanter from the table and was about to replenish his glass. "All of us to our faces?"

His sister said warningly, "Be quiet, George."

"Why should I? I don't like anybody coming around here making accusations, calling me a liar. I think we ought to kick his *ōkole* off our property. Sam and me, right now."

"I told you to be quiet. And put that decanter down. You've had enough to drink."

"The hell I have."

"More than enough." She nodded at Opaka. "Sam."

The *luna* moved for the first time. He caught hold of Millay's arm with one hand, the decanter with the other. He said softly, *"Pau,"* a word Quincannon had heard before and took to mean "enough, finished."

Millay started to argue, but when Opaka tightened his grip, the handsome features went lax and he subsided. He ran his tongue over dry lips, his gaze lowering, and meekly allowed Opaka to prod him from the room.

Grace Millay said, "Shall we go out on the lanai, Mr. Quincan-

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non? It's cooler there." And when they were outside in the shade of the monkeypod, "You'll have to excuse my brother. He's . . . high-strung and inclined to be belligerent when he drinks too much."

Weak and easily manipulated were more apt descriptions. All fuss and feathers, with no sand; anyone who showed him strength, man or woman, could back him down. Prime prey for the likes of Vereen and the Nevada Kid. It was little wonder Millay chose to leave the ranch whenever he could, Quincannon thought. Only in the vice dens of Honolulu and San Francisco would he be able to convince himself that he was a man.

When he made no comment, she said, "This man you're looking for, Vereen—what sort of swindler is he?"

"The opportunistic sort. He and his partner suit their confidence games to the person or persons they're aiming to bilk. It isn't clear yet which one they tailored to your brother."

"*Were* they able to bilk him?"

"I can't say yet. You'll have to ask him."

"If they did, is the money recoverable?"

"That depends on how soon I catch Vereen. Any verifiable amount will be returned, of course."

"Of course." Her smile was thin and sceptical. She was a handsome woman, as Abner Bannister had said, but in a severe way. A woman hard rather than soft, cynical and tenacious, who would do whatever she felt necessary to protect her own. "You'll be leaving for Hilo, then."

"Hilo, yes," he lied. "As soon as possible."

"The roads can be difficult to navigate in the dark. You may as well spend the night here—we have guest quarters out back. With an early start you'll reach Kailua in time to catch the afternoon steamer."

This suited Quincannon. He was tired and hungry, and a morning departure better fit his plans. He accepted the invitation. Grace Millay asked if he had luggage and said she would have it brought to him, and then summoned the Hawaiian girl, Mele, to show him to the guesthouse.

It was a large one-room affair, comfortably furnished. On the bedside table was a flat-wick lamp, of the kind that did not give off much light. A kerosene hanging lamp or lantern would produce a circle of flame and considerably more candlepower, but there was none of this type in the room. Where he would find one, he was sure, was in the stable.

Sam Opaka brought his carpetbag, handed it over, and departed without a word. Quincannon couldn't tell if the bag had been searched, not that it mattered a whit; it contained nothing of value or pertinence to his investigation. He washed away a layer of volcanic dust from his face, hands, and beard, and changed into

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fresh clothes for dinner.

The meal was served by lamplight on the porch, or lanai. Homegrown beef, which he found surprisingly rich and tender, and a variety of Polynesian side dishes. He and Grace Millay were the only diners. George, she explained briefly, was not feeling well and preferred to remain in his room. As they ate, she questioned him again about his investigation, seeking details he was willing to provide—up to a point. He was candid about the exploits of Lonesome Jack Vereen and the Nevada Kid and his pursuit of the pair, but he kept the existence of the crude map and the *auohe* business to himself.

After dinner he declined the offer of brandy and returned to his quarters. He read from a volume of Walt Whitman's poetry for a time, with the Navy Colt on the bed beside him and one ear cocked. There was no incident of any kind, then or when he darkened the room and permitted himself two hours' sleep. An hour past midnight, he woke promptly, as he had trained himself to do, and slipped out of the guesthouse.

The night was silent, empty, the sky moonless and cloud-ridden. No lights showed in the ranch house; a dull lantern gleam in the bunkhouse was the only light to be seen. He crossed stealthily to the stable, let himself inside.

Stalled horses moved restlessly when he struck a lucifer. That one match was all he needed to find a lantern hanging from a nail near the door, take it down, and shake it to be sure its reservoir was mostly full. Wrapped in darkness again, he drifted out to where his hired wagon had been drawn near the corral fence and hid the lantern inside the box beneath the seat.

7.

Quincannon was up and on his way shortly after first light. The ranch had already stirred to life; *paniolos* and other hirelings moved among the buildings and in the yard. None of them paid any attention to him. He saw nothing of Sam Opaka, or of either of the Millays.

Roiling, dark-veined clouds obscured most of the towering slopes of Mauna Kea. They thickened and seemed to follow him, hiding the rising sun, as he clattered along the ranch road. Once he saw a lone rider far off among the cattle on an upper valley slope. Otherwise he had the road and the morning to himself.

When he came in sight of the sea he spied more heavy clouds piling up on the horizon. The wind that rose and gusted here brought heat and humidity and the threat of another storm. But the threat had yet to be carried out by the time he reached the intersection with the Kailua road. He took this as a positive sign.

The road was deserted; he saw no one anywhere, heard only the thrum of the wind and the sullen mutter of the whitecapped sea.

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He tethered the Kona Nightingale to the same stunted tree as yesterday, removed the lantern he had appropriated from under the seat. He considered donning the rain slicker that the wagon's owner had left rolled inside the box, but decided against it. Even if the storm broke while he was prowling among the rocks below, he would be better off unencumbered by an extra garment.

He made his way down to the ledge above the beach. The wind beat at him, stinging and wetting his face with spray from the breaking waves; the blowhole muttered and spouted, but its geysers were not as high flung as the ones yesterday. The broken outer walls of the *heiau* provided some shelter as he moved into the ruins. The first of the openings he'd discovered yesterday led him, after a dozen yards, into a cul-de-sac of broken, sharp-edged rock. The second wound deeper among the massive rocks, twisting enough so that he had to light the lantern in order to mark his progress, but it soon narrowed until he was unable to fit his body into the slit. Two more passages proved to be blocked and empty as well.

The fifth, at the far end of the arrangement of flat volcanic slabs, had a tight, half-hidden opening that required him to squeeze through sideways. After a short distance he could walk normally again. This was not a wholly natural passage, but one that had been widened and carved through the rock at a sharpening downward angle. Its floor had been worn smooth by water seepage; twice Quincannon slipped and nearly lost his balance. The walls were spotted with some kind of moss that crumbled when he brushed against it. The ceiling lowered as he went, so that he was forced to bow his body and move in an awkward waddle.

He had gone more than fifty rods, he judged, when the slant lessened and the passage ended in a cavelike opening that led into what must be an ancient tube. The seaward end was choked off by a jumbled wall of rock; the section that wound back inland appeared clear. Here it was cool and dry. The lantern's light glinted off a glass-smooth black floor, off streaks of color in the surrounding rock—earth minerals carried along by the lava flows and solidified among it.

After a short distance the tube grew clogged again, apparently with the residue of more recent flows, and at first he thought he'd stumbled into another cul-de-sac. Then, behind one of the boulders, he discovered a slender continuation of the tube. He had to crawl a ways on hands and knees, muttering to himself, all but nosing the lantern ahead of him like a kid engaged in a peanut-rolling contest, before it widened again. Now hanging stalactites and jutting stalagmites obstructed his progress; one of the former gouged his neck in passing and earned itself a colorful name. The tunnel narrowed, curved, rose slightly, then once more widened, this time to merge with another, larger tube.

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No sooner had he entered this one than a faint current of warm, fresh air tickled his nostrils.

So. The tube must have another entrance, or at the least an outside vent, somewhere ahead. He quickened his pace, walking upright now, holding the lantern high. The floor here bore small cracks and the footing was more certain. Ahead, the tube widened and piles of round, smooth stones lined one of the walls. They seemed to have been arranged by primitive hands into a pattern—the first indication of human habitation. The fresh-air current was stronger; he had a briny whiff of the sea.

Around another turning, he found the *auohe.*

And something else he had not expected to find.

This section of the tube was some twenty feet in width, its stalactitic ceiling pressed low, as if spread by great force from above. The floor and the lower parts of the walls were grayish black, here and there streaked with encrustations of green and rusty red. Above and ahead, more recent lava flows had formed an embankment of solid glistening black that rose, with another upslope of the ceiling, into a jagged ledge some fifteen feet above. The air here was no longer quite so fresh. The odor that assaulted Quincannon's nostrils was that of mold and rot.

Part of the embankment had been carved into a terrace of shelves. On these lay dozens of skeletons, some wrapped in decaying tapa cloth, others arranged on powdery mats, one wearing an elaborate necklace made of sharks' or whales' teeth fastened with braided hair. Piles of bones and detached skulls were heaped together in hewn niches. Interspersed among these grisly remains were artifacts of the sort he had seen in the Millay ranch house—fiber nets, drums covered with some sort of fish or animal skin, rotting feather standards, spears and arrows and daggers, calabashes and gourds and woven baskets.

But it was none of this that triggered his sudden wrath. He subscribed to the theory espoused by Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson: When angry, count to four; when very angry, swear. And so he blued the air with a string of sulphurous oaths the originality of which would have made Mr. Clemens himself proud.

For he stood not just in an ancient burial cave but in a modern one as well. The human remains that lay sprawled at the base of the embankment were a long way yet from being a skeleton. And even at a distance, the upturned face was identifiable in the flickery lantern light.

He had finally caught up with Lonesome Jack Vereen.

A quick inspection of the corpse revealed two bullet wounds, one in the upper body and the other to the left temple. The same fate as his partner, but not by Vereen's hand this time—if in fact it had been his hand that had done for the Nevada Kid.

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Quincannon set the lantern down and searched Vereen's pockets. His client's stock certificates were not there. Nor was so much as a single coin or greenback, much less R.W. Anderson's missing five thousand dollars.

He bit off another long-jointed oath, lifted the lantern again, and stood up. He swung the light along the shelves for a closer inspection of the artifacts scattered among the bones. None of them seemed to be of particular worth except to an archaeologist or a museum curator. So then what was it about the burial cave that had fired the blood of scalawags like Vereen and the Nevada Kid? Had something else been buried here at one time, something that was now in the Millays' possession?

Pondering, Quincannon turned away from the open crypts. In the sweep of light as he did so, his eye caught movement among the rocks on the high ledge farther down. His reaction was immediate, instinctive, and life-saving.

He was already flinging himself sideways when the rifle flash came.

8.

The lantern burst from his hand and went crashing and clattering across the floor. He landed on his right shoulder and skidded into the opposite wall, the boom of the shot repeated in a dozen lusty reverberating echoes all around him. Two seconds later, the Navy Colt was in his hand and he was lying flat with the weapon held out in front of him.

There was another shot, the slug missing high and showering him with lava chips and dust. Behind him, the shattered lantern had left a trail of burning kerosene, but the reservoir must have been a quarter or less full; the flames were low and before the sniper on the ledge could trigger a third shot, they flickered out. The tube was plunged into blackness as thick as tar.

Quincannon scrambled backward and sideways toward the middle of the cave. Then he froze in place. The stillness that followed was as absolute as the dark. Now he and whoever had been trying to kill him were on equal footing; if either fired, the barrel flash would betray his position and make him a clear target.

A stalemate, but one that couldn't last. Sooner or later one of them would have to make a move.

Minutes crept away, how many he had no idea. In such darkness you quickly lost track of time. And it was difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the exact source of any sounds—both an advantage and a disadvantage. Notions formed in Quincannon's head. He discarded all but one.

His heightened sense of smell picked up a new scent on the air currents. And then something broke the silence—a distant drip-

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ping and thrumming. Ozone. Wind and rain. The Kona storm had commenced outside. Before the ambush, he would have grumbled at the fact. Now he saw it as a potential boon to his chances.

The second entrance must be somewhere up near the ledge where the shooter was hidden, so the sounds of the storm would be louder in his ears. That would make any noises down here even harder to pinpoint. In his mind's eye Quincannon could see the shape of the burial chamber here and his relative position. He calculated the distance to the turning behind him. And then he moved, propelling himself backward and sideways on forearms and knees, deliberately making as much clatter as he could.

As expected, he drew no fire. He skittered across to the embankment, then backward into the turning. The floor there was not as smooth; sharp edges ripped through his clothing, gouged and sliced into his skin. He permitted himself a small outcry at one of the sharper cuts of pain. When his hands or feet encountered loose rock, he sent them rattling across the floor. Still he drew no fire. The confusion of sounds were his ally, and so was the fact that the farther he withdrew along the tube, the more the sounds would diminish in the rifleman's ears. That was the one thing that could be marked in utter darkness—the fading of sounds that told of attempted escape back the way he'd come.

Once he was into the turning, he clawed himself upright and felt his way backward along the wall, still generating random sounds. He kept this up until he reached the juncture with the first tube and entered that one. He'd gone far enough by then, he judged, to have passed out of earshot. He stood still, waiting, listening to silence.

It might have been five minutes or ten or fifteen that he stood there. He was a man of steel nerves, but the pitch black had begun to have a faintly claustrophobic effect on him. The urge to strike a lucifer was strong. Instead he made his way back into the larger tube and began to pick his way along the wall, stealthily this time, pausing and straining to hear after every other step. The silence remained so acute it was like a pressure against his eardrums.

When he finally arrived at the turning into the burial cave, he stepped out from the wall and took the packet of lucifers from his pocket. He set himself and snicked one alight on his thumbnail, then immediately snuffed the flame and flung himself to one side.

Nothing happened. There was no shot.

He changed position and struck three more matches before he was satisfied that his trick had worked. The rifleman had believed that he sought escape through the ruins, had likely gone down to the *heiau* to set up another ambush there.

With another lucifer held aloft, Quincannon made his way to where the ledge jutted overhead. Two more matches showed him the way up to it and then the opening that led out of the tube. This

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passage, like the one in the temple, had been hand-hewn through porous rock and proved to be a much easier and more direct route to and from the burial chamber. It wound and twisted narrowly, climbed, dipped for fifty yards or so. The currents of air grew stronger, the beat of rain and distant thunder louder. One last rise, and then he could see a slit of wet, gray daylight ahead.

He approached the aperture cautiously, his Navy cocked and ready. Outside, he could make out a small flat space surrounded by glistening black rock. He eased his head through the opening. Rain fell in a silvery curtain, but the full force of the storm had yet to be unleashed; the sky was the color of a livid purple-and-black bruise. The hiss and pound of the running seas was like a low cannonade. But all he could see was rock. He stepped out, hunted up a declivity that led out of the flat space, and followed it until he reached a point where the ocean came into view. A few seconds after that, there was a loud boom and a spout of water burst upward below and to his left—the blowhole erupting again.

Now he knew where he was. The path down from the road, he judged, should be close-by. This proved to be the case. He found it, hunkered there to reconnoiter. The ledge and the blowhole were now visible, but there was no sign of the shooter. Mindful of the slick footing, he started down.

He had almost reached the ledge before he spied his adversary, forted up behind a rock with the barrel of his rifle trained on the entrance to the *heiau*. The man's identity came as no surprise—Sam Opaka, the Millays' *luna*. Sent to do George Millay's bidding, or possibly his sister's. Quincannon paused to wipe a sheen of rain and spray from his eyes before he closed the distance between himself and the Hawaiian.

His foot dislodged a stone, sent it rattling down. It was a small noise, all but lost in the voices of storm and sea, but somehow Opaka must have heard it. Either that, or the man possessed a sixth sense for danger. He moved with a suddenness that surprised Quincannon, in one motion levering himself to his feet and bringing the rifle to bear. He fired first, by a fraction of a second; the bullet ricocheted harmlessly off rock. Quincannon's shot, even though hurried and off-aim, found Opaka's arm or shoulder and caused him to lose his grip on the rifle. But it didn't take him down. He shouted something, a sound even wilder than the storm, and charged as Quincannon reached the ledge.

It was not in Quincannon's nature to shoot an unarmed man. Then again, it was not in his nature to lose either a skirmish or his life by standing on principle. He triggered a round at the onrushing man. And to his astonishment, he missed—an exceedingly rare occurrence that he later blamed on the storm and the poor footing. He had no chance to fire a third time. Opaka crashed into him and

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sent them both tumbling across the fissured surface of the ledge.

The blowhole fountained with a roar just then, drenching them both with its downpour. They rolled over in a clinch, Opaka coming up on top as foamy water swirled and tugged around them. But he was one-armed now; the bullet must have shattered bone in the other and rendered it useless. Even so, he was bull-strong and fending him off was no easy task. A thump to the side of the head rattled Quincannon's brains and made him very angry. He swore, bucked, and heaved the *luna* off him. The Navy was still in his hand; he cracked Opaka on the cheek with the barrel, a blow that sent him reeling.

When the Hawaiian staggered upright, he was close to the blowhole. In the tube below, the surf snarled and hissed and let loose another jet of water. The boil of it coming out of the mouthlike opening churned up around Opaka's feet, caused him to lose his balance. He fell, sliding and splashing in the backflow, clawing at the rock as he was pulled backward.

There was nothing Quincannon could do. An instant later, in a wild churning of arms and legs, Sam Opaka vanished into the blowhole.

9.

The storm had blown through by the time Quincannon reached the Millay ranch. Small comfort; he was bedraggled and soaked to the skin. And still furious.

He found Grace Millay in the stable, helping one of the *paniolos* tend to a foundered horse. She showed little emotion while he told her what had happened in the lava tube and what he had found there, but the news of Sam Opaka's death struck her like a blow. She wavered, steadied herself against the stable wall with her eyes squeezed shut. It took half a minute for her to regain her equilibrium. When she opened her eyes again, it was as if she had never lost control at all.

"I didn't send him after you," she said.

"But you did know about the burial cave."

"George and I found it when we were children. I'm not proud of this, but after my father died we brought some of the artifacts up here to the house."

"Objects of value?"

"Hardly. It's the burial place of the high priest who ordered the *heiau* built, his and his family's." A vein throbbed in her forehead; the cords in her neck stood out in sharp relief. "It's still *kapu*. Sam Opaka was a half-caste, but he held to the old beliefs. He wouldn't have violated the taboo on his own initiative."

"But he would have on orders from your brother."

"My brother." She said it bitterly, with a measure of disgust.

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"Yes, he would have. Sam was fiercely loyal to both of us."

"Loyal enough to commit mayhem, evidently."

"I don't believe he was trying to kill you. And I don't believe he killed that swindler Vereen. Neither Sam nor I ever laid eyes on the man, nor knew anything about him until you came."

Quincannon said, "We'll go have a talk with your brother now."

George Millay was in his study in the ranch house, working over a set of ledgers. He looked up as they entered, started at the sight of Quincannon. His handsome face was pale and drawn in the lamplight, blood-veined eyes bearing further witness to the hangover he was suffering.

His sister went straight to the desk. "Stand up," she commanded.

"Grace . . ."

"Stand up, I said."

He lifted himself slowly out of his chair, and when he was upright she fetched him a roundhouse slap. It had the force of a whipcrack, staggering him. "Sam is dead," she said. "Do you hear me? Sam—is—dead!"

Millay blinked several times, fingering his cheek, before her words registered.

"Sam? Oh God, what—" His bloodshot eyes focused on Quincannon. "You!" he said to Quincannon. "You were at the *heiau.* You killed him."

"I believed he was trying to kill me. On your orders."

"No! I didn't tell him to do that. Only scare you off if . . ."

"If I found the burial chamber. And what you left there."

Millay made a faint moaning sound. He sat down again, heavily, and held his head in his hands. His voice, when it came, was low and thick with pity for himelf. "That bastard Vereen gave me no choice. It was self-defense. He had a pistol, he forced me to take him into the cave. He would've shot me when he saw there really wasn't any cloak. Almost did. If he hadn't stumbled—"

"Cloak?"

"Feather cloak. Damn nonexistent feather cloak."

His sister said, "You fool, you buffoon. You told him *that?"*

"I was trying to impress a woman in San Francisco. . . . I didn't see any harm in making the claim that far from home. Vereen and Joplin were there at the time, within earshot. They booked passage on the same ship, struck up an acquaintance—pretended to be businessmen, sports. I didn't find out they were crooks until the last night in Honolulu."

Quincannon produced the crude map. "Who drew this?"

"I did. Joplin asked for it."

"When Vereen wasn't present, no doubt. Double-crossers, the pair of them. What happened that last night? You went with them to their bungalow on Hoapili Street, eh?"

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"Vereen's idea. Discuss a business proposition . . . they wanted me to let them broker the cloak to a rich man they knew in Los Angeles. I tried to tell them then that I'd made up the story, but they wouldn't believe me. Kept feeding me *okolehao* and I . . . I must've passed out."

"And when you came to, Joplin was dead and Vereen claimed you'd shot him."

Millay nodded. The motion made him wince. There was a decanter of clear liquid on the desk; he reached for it. Grace snatched it away from him.

"Grace, please . . ."

"No. You've had enough of this poison."

"I killed two men, Grace. Three, if Sam's dead. There's not enough *okolehao* in the world to make me forget that."

Quincannon said, "Like as not, you didn't kill Ben Joplin. My guess is Vereen murdered his partner and blamed you to gain a hold over you. And to take this feather cloak, whatever it is, for himself."

"Two or three, what's the difference?" Then, "I tried again to tell Vereen there wasn't any cloak. He wouldn't listen. Threatened to turn me in to police if I didn't take him to the burial cave."

"And after you managed to shoot him dead, you emptied his pockets."

"I was afraid to leave anything that might identify him if the body were ever found."

"What did you do with what you took? And with his luggage? If you tell me you disposed of it all into the sea, I promise you'll be one sorry lad."

"No. I threw the luggage away, kept the money and some stock certificates."

"Ah. Let's have the lot."

Millay had hidden the items in his desk. R.W. Anderson's missing stocks were all there, but the amount of cash was considerably less than five thousand dollars. The rest must have been spent by the thieves; Millay swore the handful of bills were all he'd taken from Vereen.

Quincannon counted them carefully. The total amount was $1,120. He said, "You will arrange for a bank draft, payable to John Quincannon, in the amount of three thousand eight hundred and eighty dollars."

Grace Millay asked, "Why should we do that?"

He told her why.

"And then what? What do you plan to do about the two dead men?"

Mollified now, Quincannon said, "Nothing, as long as the draft is honored at your Honolulu bank. Your brother claims the shooting was self-defense—I have no reason to doubt the veracity of that, and no jurisdiction in such matters in any case. As for Vereen's

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remains, if the bones of ancient priests have no objection to those of a murdering grifter lying among them, I have none, either."

He left the Millay ranch for the last time a short while later, with the stock certificates and a signed letter authorizing the bank draft tucked into the pocket of a dry coat, and with the answer to a final question supplied by Grace Millay. The "feather cloak" which had precipitated all the trouble was in fact a priceless garment made for Hawaiian kings from the tiny, delicate yellow feathers of now-extinct o-o and mamo birds. Kamehameha's cloak, one of the few known to exist and which now reposed in the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, contained hundreds of thousands of these feathers and reputedly had taken several women fifty years to finish. Feather cloaks were not made for high priests; there had never been any such treasure in the burial cave on Millay land.

Such was the stuff of lies, deceit, greed, and murder.

10.

Two days later Quincannon was back in Honolulu. But he didn't stay on there as he had planned to do at the beginning of his manhunt. Once he had the full $5,000 safely in hand, he booked passage on the next ship bound for San Francisco. The various pleasures to be found in the Nuuanu Avenue Port of Hell district no longer appealed to him. His misadventures on the Big Island were partly responsible, but the primary reason was that he missed San Francisco in general and Sabina in particular.

Dear Sabina, not only his capable partner but the love of his life. Even if his passion was thus far unrequited and she stubbornly refused to succumb to ploys, manipulations, entreaties, or any other method of honest seduction. Perhaps the shell brooch he had picked out for her in a Merchant Street shop would make her more receptive. Not that that was the reason he'd bought the present, of course. His motives, as always where she was concerned, were pure.

When the ship sailed out of Honolulu harbor, he stood at the rail for his last glimpse of Hawaii's tropical lushness. Now that he was leaving, his feelings toward the islands had mellowed. They had their allure, to be sure. At another time, under different circumstances, he might actually have found them stimulating.

The mellowness lasted until the ship was three hours out from Oahu. That was when yet another tropical storm put in a sudden appearance and set the sea achurn, the steamer rolling, and Quincannon lurching to his stateroom.

He lay in there green-gilled and groaning and vowed that he would shoot himself before he took another ocean voyage. As for paradise, he thought morosely, one man's version was another man's aversion. Like beauty, it was all in the eye—and the stomach—of the beholder. ●

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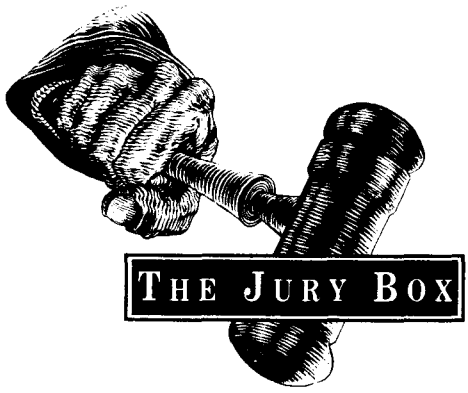

by Jon L. Breen

Who was the best writer of mystery fiction to debut in the 1990s? Certainly two candidates for the honor would be Michael Connelly and Lee Child. Connelly, whose series cop Hieronymus (Harry) Bosch made his debut with *The Black Echo* (1992), has served an unprecedented two terms as president of Mystery Writers of America and has become one of the most eloquent spokesmen for the genre as well as one of its most skilled practitioners. Child, whose former Army MP Jack Reacher was introduced in *Killing Floor* (1997), is a British-born author who writes in a letter-perfect American idiom. While best-known as novelists, both have written occasional short stories. Connelly, editor of the International Association of Crime Writers' *Murder in Vegas* (Forge, $14.95), has good new stories in two other star-studded collections: the Woolrichian coming-of-age suspense piece "After Midnight" in John Harvey's *Men From Boys* (Dark Alley, $13.95) and a rare short case for Bosch, "Cielo Azul," in Otto Penzler's *Dangerous Women* (Mysterious, $24.95 hardcover, $13.95 trade paperback). Child has the lead-off story, "Ten Keys," in *The Cocaine Chronicles* (Akashic, $14.95), a uniquely specialized collection edited by Gary Phillips and Jervey Tervalon.

As their latest novels show, both writers honor the key element that makes their chosen genre unique: real detective work and fair play to the reader. **** Michael Connelly: *The Closers,* Little, Brown, $26.95. Reinstated in the LAPD and assigned to cold cases with his old partner Kizmin Rider, Bosch looks into the late-1980s murder of a high-school girl and finds the case complicated by departmental corruption. Returning from a brief stint as first-person private eye, Bosch is back to the third-person narrative that suits him better. The reliable Connelly's finely honed whodunit provides both sound

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procedural detail and subtle clueing, including even a not-quite-Queenian dying message.

**** Lee Child: *One Shot,* Delacorte, $25. In an unnamed Indiana city, the police have an airtight case against former Army sniper James Barr for a rush-hour killing spree that killed five people. But Barr claims they have the wrong guy and asks them to send for Reacher, a very hard man to find. Mixing detection and thriller elements, Child is a writer to treasure, a master of all the keys to first-rate crime fiction: style, plot, pace, and character. What other writer gives you Sherlockian deduction, a Bondish storming of the bad guys' lair, and even a Poirotian gathering of the suspects?

*** James Sallis: *Drive,* Poisoned Pen, $19.95. The protagonist, appropriately known as Driver, is an automotive movie stunt man with a sideline criminal specialty that threatens to bring him to grief. Don't tell him the details, he insists, for all he does is drive. Some novels are said to be plot-driven, others character-driven. While it provides both of the above, this short novel is primarily style-driven, with superb fiction noir prose and a fine sense of locale, be it Phoenix, Los Angeles, or Brooklyn.

*** Peter Lovesey: *The Circle,* Soho, $24. The house-fire murder of a duplicitous publisher is the first of several arson incidents connected to the Chichester Writers' Circle, whose meetings provide some fine comedic interludes. Though contemporary accoutrements include observations on text messaging and quotations from a Web site devoted to the crimes, this is a solidly classical puzzle novel. The surprise solution is an old chestnut expertly roasted. Inspector Henrietta Mallin heads the police investigation, but until near the halfway mark, detecting is in the hands of amateurs. (Lovesey's Peter Diamond is credited on the jacket with an "appearance," but few leading actors would accept screen credit for such a brief cameo: one page out of 358.)

*** Robert Barnard: *The Graveyard Position,* Scribner, $25. In a claimant story with a difference, Barnard makes it clear from the first that Merlyn Docherty, returning from the Continent to Leeds for his inheritance after the death of his clairvoyant aunt, is who he says he is, but some of his relations purport to think him an impostor, and either way, his life may be in danger. Recurring cops Charlie Peace and Mike Oddie are present but not central in what is essentially an amateur-detective novel. Barnard is so good that even a lesser work (which this decidedly is) is full of benefits, including droll social and political observations, wild flights of plotting fancy, and even a chance to expand your vocabulary. That is, unless you can already use *fissiparousness* in a sentence. (As *EQMM* readers know, Dia-

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mond Dagger recipient Barnard is at least as good in the short story form. He appears in both the first two volumes of Maxim Jakubowski's new anthology series, *The Best British Mysteries* [reprinted at $9.95] and *The Best British Mysteries 2005* [$25.95], both published by Allison & Busby.)

*** Brian Pinkerton: *Vengeance,* Leisure, $6.99. Chicago schoolteacher Rob Corus wants revenge after losing his wrongful death suit against a lawyer whose SUV killed Rob's fiancée in a road-rage hit and run. This is energetically plotted, never-sure-where-it's-going pure entertainment, which occasionally verges on black comedy despite the grim subject matter. To say on which classic suspense novel and film it is a larger-canvas variation would give away too much.

** Ed Gaffney: *Premeditated Murder,* Dell, $6.99. Law partners Terry Tallach and Zach Wilson take on the seemingly hopeless defense of Calvin Thompkins, charged in a Massachusetts court with the shooting murder of six people. This promising debut could have done with less contrived action and suspense cross-cutting and more on the central legal issue, expressed thus by one character: "Is it legally acceptable to kill another person even if you are correct in your belief that the person is a terrorist?"

** Leslie Caine: *False Premises,* Dell, $6.99. The second novel about rival Colorado interior decorators Erin Gilbert and Steve Sullivan has an intriguing initial situation: Erin's enigmatic friend and client Laura Smith has replaced all the antique furnishings acquired for her with fakes. I found the relationships tiresome and missed the redeeming humor of some other cozy series, but the wealth of decorating details will undoubtedly interest many readers.

* Joel Goldman: *Deadlocked,* Pinnacle, $6.99. Here's another that loses its way after a promising beginning. Kansas City attorney Lou Mason attends the execution of Ryan Kowalczyk, convicted of a bludgeoning murder committed when he was a teenager fifteen years before. Now both Kowalczyk's mother and the son of the two victims want Mason to prove the guilt of Whitney King, the acquitted co-defendant in the case. Unfortunately the book turns into an absurdly complicated and unsatisfactory mishmash, falling into all the contemporary traps born of excessive page counts. Goldman could do much better.

Among the recent reprints is the 1940 debut of amateur sleuths Jeff and Haila Troy in Kelley Roos's *Made Up to Kill* (Rue Morgue, $14.95), sure to delight lovers of theatrical mysteries.

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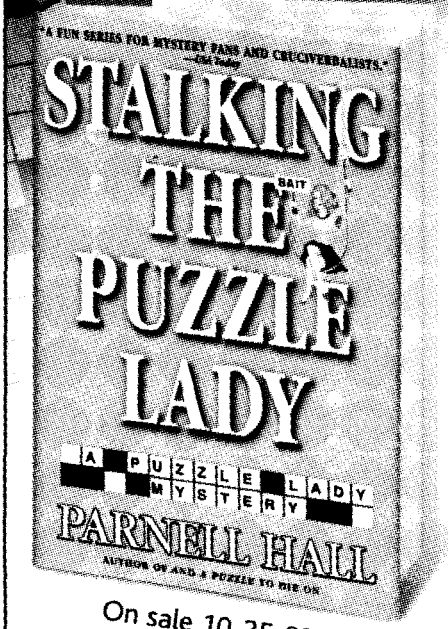
There are two ways to spell murder.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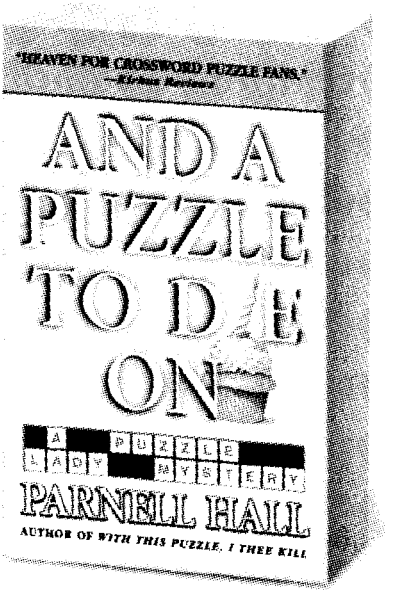
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Art by Mark Evans

MONEY RUN

by Dave Zeltserman

Pete Mitchel sat at the bar feeling sorry for himself. Things hadn't gone as planned. Instead of raising enough money to bankroll his Hollywood scam, he had just enough left to get drunk on. Maybe, he grinned to himself sourly, enough to pass out on. He placed five dollars on the bar and nodded to the bartender, who responded in kind by collecting the money and refilling his empty glass. As Pete nursed his gin, he spotted Warren Langley.

Langley, a thin, wiry sort with a deep, friendly smile, slid onto the barstool next to him and coughed. "How's it going, Pete?" he asked, clearing his throat. "The baking-soda business making any money?"

"Well, you know how it is." Pete could feel his cheeks reddening. "A couple of things crapped out on me and . . ." He let the sentence die in his throat.

"Yeah, I know how it is." Langley ordered a beer and sipped it before shaking his head, his smile growing friendlier. "Man," he said, his eyes slightly amused, "you were supposed to be a bright guy from New York. You're here in Boston less than a month and you're peddling baking soda as coke. Not a very smart

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thing to do if you ask me."

"I appreciate your concern," Pete murmured. Warren Langley had befriended him when he had come to Boston, setting him on to a couple of ventures that had, unfortunately, busted out. While Pete liked the small, affable man, he wished Langley would leave so he could suffer his misery in peace.

"Don't you think you're acting stupid? The cops could pick you up for selling narcotics near a public school."

"I'm not selling narcotics, am I? Just a common household product. As best I can see, I'm saving these school kids a trip to the market."

A newcomer to *EQMM*, Dave Zeltserman has sold stories to many other periodicals, including *Hardboiled* and *New Mystery Magazine*. He has two novels in print, *In His Shadow* (2002) and *Fast Lane* (2004/ Point Blank Press), the latter of which became a Poisoned Pen Bookstore Crime Club selection. He lives in the Boston area with his wife Judy. ✝

Langley gave the matter some thought and then slowly shook his head and chuckled softly. As he studied the foam fading from his beer his smile became somber. "I gotta tell you, buddy," he said, "I feel bad for hooking you up with those busted jobs. I got a chance to make it up to you. Two grand worth."

Pete turned to his companion, raising an eyebrow. "And how's that?"

"Nothing dangerous or anything. Nothing more than delivering a package to Las Vegas, but it's serious stuff. And serious people. You can't afford any kind of screwup. None whatsoever."

Pete studied Langley through a gin-induced haze; the type a half-dozen shots of cheap eighty-six-proof rotgut would naturally produce. He could see apprehension in the small man's eyes. Obviously Langley had some doubts as to whether he could do a simple delivery job. He felt insulted, but the alcohol dulled his outrage. Slowly, he let a smile spread on his face from ear to ear. "You're talking to the right man," he said at last.

The next day Langley brought Pete to a small Italian restaurant in Boston's North End. Pete felt dehydrated from his previous night's drinking. A hard, painful thumping knocked in his head and his tongue felt like a wool sock had been wrapped around it. From his outward appearance, though, it would've been impossible to tell he was suffering. His gray eyes were clear, his rough good-looking features appeared at ease. As usual, his grooming was impeccable.

A nod sent the two men to a private room in back. Sitting alone behind a table for eight was a large man with a severely receding

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hairline and tiny, dull eyes. Langley quickly ran to the man, dropped to one knee, grabbed the hand the large man waved to him, and pressed his lips against the heavy knuckles.

"Thank you, Mr. Carbone," he said in a hushed, gravely serious tone. "We are deeply grateful for your audience. I would like to introduce you to my friend, Pete Mitchel."

Langley released the man's hand, and Carbone again casually waved his hand, this time signaling for the two men to sit.

"Does your friend understand how important this is?" the large man demanded.

"Yes, Mr. Carbone." Langley's head was bowed in reverence.

"You," Carbone pointed a large sausage finger at Pete. "Do you consider yourself a bright man?"

"Yes, sir."

Carbone sat motionless, staring at Pete, his small black eyes glazing over. Finally, satisfied, his eyes came to life. With a grunt, he lifted a briefcase onto the table and then pulled two envelopes from his inside jacket pocket—one he handed to Langley, the other to Pete.

"There are instructions inside," he said to Pete, his eyes unblinking. "And a bus ticket to Las Vegas. You will deliver that briefcase to the address specified. There will be no mistakes. Swear your life to that."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, swear your life to that."

Pete shrugged. "I swear," he said.

"No," the large man shook his head. "Your life."

"I swear my life."

"Good." A heavy weariness seemed to fall over Carbone's face. "I take your pledge to heart," he said. And with that, he picked up an Italian newspaper and ignored Pete and Langley.

The abruptness of the large man took Pete by surprise, but Langley was on his feet, profusely thanking Carbone for his generosity. He gave Pete an impatient signal to grab the briefcase and the two of them hurried out of the back room. When they got to the street, Pete looked inside his envelope and saw that along with the bus ticket and instructions, there were twenty crisp hundred-dollar bills. Langley let loose with a short whoop of relief and took a thousand dollars from his envelope. "My commission," he said, a big smile stretched across his face.

Pete laughed. "Not bad for an hour's work."

"No, not bad." Langley flashed Pete a sheepish look. "Not bad at all. I hope you keep in mind the promise you made."

"What about it?"

"Well," Langley hesitated. "You can't make any mistakes with this, kid. He's dead serious about that promise."

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The muscles around Pete's mouth tightened, drawing his lips into a slight smile. He didn't like what he perceived as Langley's condescending attitude. After all, this was only a delivery job. Any monkey in a suit could do it. "I could end up on the wrong bus and get lost, huh?" he asked.

Langley took a step back and raised both hands in a mock defensive posture. "Hey, don't get mad at me. I'm just pointing out what has to be pointed out. This is serious business. I'm involved, too, you know. If anything happens, they're going to be coming after me, also."

"Sure." A muscle in Pete's jaw was pulsing like a rabbit's heart. "You're just being helpful."

"Look, if you have any problems, give me a call." Langley slowly recited his phone number. "You want me to write it down?" he asked.

"That's okay," Pete said. "I've got it."

"Well, enjoy the sun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." As Langley moved away, he brought a hand up as a kind of salute. Pete stood silently until the small man faded from sight, and then crossed the street and entered yet another small Italian restaurant, heading straight towards the bathroom.

He quickly went to work on the briefcase lock. It was easy. Within two minutes he had the case opened and its contents forced a genuine smile. In one corner of the case was a Browning .25-caliber automatic and a silencer. The rest of the case, though, was filled with tens, twenties, and hundreds. Pete thumbed through the stacks of bills and counted thirty thousand dollars. He took a deep breath and closed the case.

His palms felt moist. He rubbed them several times across his pants and took another deep breath before heading out onto the street. With thirty thousand dollars as seed money he should be able to do something. He checked his bus ticket. The trip to Vegas wasn't for three days. That would give him enough time to go back to New York and organize a high-stakes poker game. He'd have to kick in about five hundred for fake police uniforms and, of course, take on a couple of partners, but after the game was "busted" his split should at least match the seed money. Thirty grand would probably be enough for a Hollywood scam that had been playing in his mind for years. Right after the delivery to Vegas, he'd head straight to California.

There was a gorgeous redhead walking about thirty yards in front of him. As plans whirled through his head, he found himself absent-mindedly enjoying the soft rhythmic motion of her hips. He was so absorbed by his own thoughts he didn't pick up on the motives of the punk heading towards her. It wasn't until the punk grabbed her handbag, and the woman screamed as the punk hit her, that the scene registered on him.

Pete then moved quickly. Within seconds he had sprinted to the

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punk, grasping the handbag and holding his briefcase with one hand and using his free hand to reach for an eight-inch switchblade to persuade the punk with.

The punk tugged hard on the handbag and then pushed it away using all his weight. Caught off balance, Pete could feel his feet slipping out from beneath him. Next thing he knew, he was sitting on the sidewalk smack in the middle of a puddle. He felt stupid as he watched the punk run away.

The redhead was standing over him speechless. She was wearing a tight-fitting business suit that showed off nice curves. Her green eyes were dazzling, but not quite as much, Pete noticed, as the diamond earrings she was wearing. Pete smiled at her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I guess I'm a little shaken," she said, color slowly seeping through her ashen paleness.

"How's your cheek?"

"What? Oh." She put a hand up to where she was struck, flinching slightly. "I must've rolled with the punch," she said, smiling. "I think I'm okay."

Pete nodded, returning her smile. He held up her handbag. "I believe this belongs to you, ma'am," he said with the utmost courtesy.

All at once she started laughing—a nice, wholesome, friendly laugh. Pete liked it. He also felt stupid as all hell. "I'm sorry," she said at last, wiping tears from her eyes. "Ha, ha, I'm so sorry. You just look so funny sitting in that puddle. But thank you."

"I'm glad I could be of service," he said gruffly.

"I really am grateful to you for rescuing me." Her dazzling eyes twinkled. "My hotel is less than a block away. Why don't you come with me? We can get your suit dry-cleaned."

She offered him her hand to help him out of the puddle. The beautiful redhead introduced herself as Lauren Hadley, visiting Boston on business. He introduced himself as Paul Michaels. As they walked, Pete laughed and joked with her, all the while trying to estimate the value of her earrings. They looked real to him. His sixth sense told him they were real. He'd get his chance to palm them off her. If they turned out to be cubic zirconium, he'd give them to Toni, his fiancée. If they were real diamonds, he'd sell them and use part of the proceeds to buy Toni a nice pair of cubic zirconium earrings.

By the time they got to her room, Pete was glad she had made the offer. And not just because of the diamonds. His clothes were soaking wet, from the lower part of his back to his thighs. They were uncomfortable and he was anxious to get out of them.

She pointed out the bathroom. "Paul, why don't you change in there. You can take a shower and I'll call the concierge about sending up a man's robe. This place advertises two-hour dry-cleaning. You don't mind spending a couple of hours alone with me, do you?"

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He flashed her a grin. "You do what you have to do," he said.

"That's awfully brave of you." She took hold of his hands and placed them on the side of her face. The skin felt hot. "I'm still trembling from that mugger," she breathed softly. There was a glint in her eyes.

Pete brought the briefcase into the bathroom and got out of his wet clothes, leaving his wallet, switchblade, and envelope on the vanity. He wrapped a towel around his waist and carried his soiled suit and underwear out to Lauren. As he headed back to the bathroom she called out to him, a warm throaty purr resonating in her voice, asking him not to be too long.

The hotel was a high-class one and the room was really more of a suite with a separate sitting area in the bathroom. Pete examined the lock and was satisfied with it. Still, he propped a wicker chair under the door handle. One thing he took a great deal of pride in was his thoroughness. Always one step ahead of the next guy—which was why his recent setbacks had been so tough to swallow. He wasn't used to his plans crumbling apart, and it hurt him deeply.

As Pete stepped into the shower and turned the hot water on, he could feel his body start to relax. Finally, the bad luck had run its course. Things were back to normal. Better than normal. First two grand for a simple delivery job, then thirty grand to borrow for seed money, and now diamond earrings that were probably worth five grand. And to top it off, an hour or so to tumble around with Lauren's luscious and willing body. Pete smiled, wondering how long it would take for her peaches-and-cream skin to blush a deep red.

By the time he got out of the shower he was feeling on top of the world. As he reached for a towel, he noticed the bathroom door was missing. He stared at it, unable to comprehend why it was that way, and then a sickish feeling wormed its way into his stomach. He only half glanced at where he had left the briefcase, knowing full well it was gone.

He stood motionless, his eyes narrowed, his features marble hard. Peering out from the corners of his eyes he could see that the envelope was gone but his wallet and knife were still on the vanity. He let another minute pass before reaching for a towel. As he left the bathroom, he could see the bathroom door lying flat in the hallway. It had been taken off its hinges. When Pete had first entered the room, he had seen clothes scattered about and a suitcase next to the bed. They were no longer there. Of course, neither was Lauren.

Pete sat down on the bed, a towel wrapped around him, and tried to think. It was obvious that he had been set up. The redhead and punk had been tipped off about the briefcase, and he, like the first-class putz that he was, handed it right to them.

Now he was stuck in a hotel room without any clothes and without any real hope. He wanted to call Toni. To beg her to drive up

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from New York and rescue him. He wanted to, but he knew he couldn't. It would be tough enough under normal circumstances to explain how he was literally caught with his pants down, but it would be impossible with the way things stood between them. Before he left for Boston, they had had a doozy of a fight—one of their worst. Well, he had really only been a spectator, with Toni screaming enough for both of them.

It had ended badly. With tears streaming down her face, Toni announced their engagement was over. She was sick of his excuses about why they couldn't set a wedding date. She finally realized he was a lousy stinking jerk who had no intention of living up to his word. Then, in dramatic fashion, she stormed from their apartment, her sobs echoing painfully from the hallway. During their five-year engagement, it was the first time she'd threatened to break things off, and it had Pete worried.

As much as he hated to do it, he called Warren Langley.

Langley paced the hotel room, his small body moving in short jerky motions. "Less than an hour and you lose the case. Less than a goddamn hour!"

Pete sat silently. Langley glared at him, his eyes burning with anger. "A real smart guy, aren't you? Too smart to listen to me, huh? Well, I'm sorry I insulted you before by trying to warn you to be careful. I guess you showed me!"

Pete met Langley's angry stare. "I was set up . . ." he tried to explain.

"Don't give me that crap. You screwed up, plain and simple."

Pete shrugged. "Okay, I screwed up. What next?"

"What next?" An indignant snort exploded from the small man. He shook his head with disgust and then curled his lips and let loose with a string of curses. When Langley had arrived at the hotel room, he had brought Pete a soiled work shirt, a pair of worn corduroys, and an army jacket. The clothes smelled heavily of garlic and onions, and itched around the crotch, neck, and armpits. He now listened as Langley compared him to the different anatomical parts of a donkey. He had half a mind to deck the small man, but a sickish feeling deep in his gut held him back.

"Let me explain it to you," Langley seethed. "Mr. Carbone needed a job done outside of the family. You see, if he went to the family with it, he'd have to split a good deal of money with them and he didn't want to. So you screwing up will put him in a very uncomfortable situation. And since I recommended you, I too will be made very uncomfortable. But believe me, not as much as you."

From his outward appearance Pete seemed calm and unconcerned. Inside, though, he was dying. His instinct was to flee, and he would have if he'd had any money. He considered rolling Lang-

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ley for whatever was in his pockets, but decided against it. He asked how they were going to square things with Carbone.

"I don't know," Langley answered dully. "You meet me at Jack's in two hours and I'll see what I can come up with. And trust me, you better show up."

The small man gave Pete a sullen stare and then left in a huff. Pete sat for a few minutes to collect his thoughts. Fortunately, the redhead had left his shoes. Thank heaven for little things, he told himself as he slipped them on.

Jack's bar was a little cubbyhole of a place bordering Boston's Chinatown and theater district. When Pete showed up there he was still wearing the ratty clothes Langley had brought him, having been too depressed to bother going back to his hotel to change out of them.

The bar was crowded, filled with a mix of hookers, college students, and businessmen. As Pete pushed his way in, he caught sight of Langley. The small man looked in his direction, then left his seat and headed to the back of the bar. Pete followed him. Noises lofted through the air: glasses being slid across tables, a woman shouting angrily, men laughing.

Langley had found an isolated spot. When Pete approached him, he stared at Pete with eyes that were nothing more than cold ice chunks. He spoke in a voice that was painfully low. "I arranged for us to meet with Mr. Carbone tomorrow night. Before that you're going to make it up to him."

"W-What do you mean?" Pete said, amazed to hear himself stutter.

"I've been calling around—" He stopped to let a large, busty woman pass by. "And found you a job." Pete felt something hard and cold being forced into his hand. He looked down and saw that Langley was giving him a gun. "Take it," Langley ordered. Pete obeyed, hiding the gun in his army jacket.

"You're going to hit a local bookie tomorrow," Langley explained. "The mark should be carrying ten grand. You're going to stick the gun in his ribs and free him of his burden. Time and place are written on this paper." He shoved something into Pete's jacket pocket.

"No." Pete shook his head. "I don't do that type of job."

"Is that so? I guess, buddy boy, you're going to have to start learning."

"You don't understand—"

"Listen," the small man's tone was murderous. "You're going to make it up to Mr. Carbone. You're going to show him respect."

"I can't—"

Langley moved within an inch of Pete and poked him hard in the chest. "You can and you will," he forced through compressed lips. "Mr. Carbone's got connections all up and down the East Coast. If you ever want to set foot in your beloved New York again, you will show the man the proper respect. You're going to do what

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you can to pay him back."

"There was thirty grand in the briefcase."

"You broke into it, huh?" Langley smiled, his lean face as deadly as a razor. "So you know Mr. Carbone's not going to be happy only getting back ten grand. But it's the only chance you got."

Pete looked away from Langley, his eyes seeming to focus on some distant point. Slowly, he nodded.

"So you see how it is," Langley said gravely. "Tomorrow night at nine you meet us at the same Italian restaurant." He started to walk away but turned back. "And don't try anything stupid," he warned. "Even if you run to freaking Afghanistan, don't bet Mr. Carbone won't be able to reach you."

It was minutes after Langley had left before Pete moved. Slowly, a smile stretched across his face and he laughed out loud, startling a tired-looking blonde a few feet away.

While Langley had been poking him in the chest, he realized how deep the setup was. If Langley had been watching him carefully enough, he might have detected a slight glimmer in his eyes. That was the only indication, though, that Pete gave of his revelation.

He found himself admiring the scam Langley and Carbone were running on him. It was cute. First hand him thirty grand, then take it away, and finally, scare him hard enough to commit an armed robbery.

Of course, they had to soften him up first. It was more than a coincidence that his luck turned sour after he had met up with Langley. He had to be made desperate enough to accept their delivery job.

Pete left the bar and started walking towards the Charles River. The cold night air blew against his face. He felt restless.

The scam had to be an ongoing concern. A game they played on drifters. Find some witless sap and make him dance. They were probably right now having a good, long laugh at his expense. More than anything, Pete wanted to rip them off, and he was willing to bet they still had the thirty grand on them. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to take it away.

He had come up to the Charles River. He walked halfway across one of the connecting bridges to Cambridge before dropping Langley's gun into the water. In order to play along with the scam he would have to come up with ten grand, but he wasn't going to do it with a holdup. His angle was the confidence game, the scam, the ripoff—not guns and robberies. Even though he carried a switchblade, he did it more for show than anything else. If he could flee, he would flee. If not, he would show the knife for effect, hoping to scare the son of a bitch away.

As he walked back to his motel, he thought about how he was going to come up with ten grand, and his thoughts kept centering around Toni.

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"You must think I'm stupid, don't you?" Toni demanded, her voice hot with anger. When Pete first called her, her attitude was icy cold, but that quickly melted into a passionate outburst in which she called him every name in the book. Inwardly, Pete felt a great sense of relief. He had fully expected her to hang up on him with frigid indifference. The fact that she was so angry showed he still had her hooked.

Pete was stretched out on the bed. The first thing he did when he got back to his room was dump his soiled clothes into the trash and scrub himself clean. Now, wrapped in a cloth robe, he explained to Toni that of course he didn't think she was stupid. "I think thirty thousand would be a good start for a marriage," he said matter-of-factly.

There was a long hesitation. Then Toni asked him if he meant it.

"Of course I do. It's about time, isn't it? As soon as we get the money we'll stop off at the first chapel we see."

Another long hesitation. "Pete, I don't have ten thousand," she said at last.

"Well, bring what you can. And try to get here by noon. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow." He gave her his hotel address and phone number, and hung up.

He didn't believe her about the money. Toni worked as a hostess at a club near Times Square, and Pete knew guys were always tipping her fives, tens, twenties, and sometimes even more to take off her clothes and join the other strippers onstage. She never did, but that didn't stop the club's patrons from trying. And they had good reason to try. Toni was a knockout. Barely five feet tall and at most ninety pounds, she had a shape that would make any man fantasize. And with big brown eyes that could melt butter and a smile that could stop a heart, she was the club's biggest draw. Even though she left her clothes on—as tight-fitting as they were—she took home more in tips than any of the strippers. Charlie, the club's owner, liked to brag that Toni added an element of class to the joint.

Pete slowly drifted into sleep with thoughts of thirty thousand dollars dancing in his head.

He woke up the next morning refreshed. Strong sunlight streamed into the room, warming him. It felt nice. He lazily reached for his watch and saw it was ten o'clock. After taking a long, hot shower, he dressed in jeans and a sweater. He would've preferred to put on a suit, but the redhead had taken the only one he brought to Boston. Lying on the bed, he closed his eyes and waited for Toni.

A few minutes before noon there was a knock on the door. Pete opened it and Toni stood in the hallway, eyeing him suspiciously. "If this is a trick," she threatened, "it's all over between us."

He scooped her up in his arms and twirled her around in circles.

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He felt her body slowly loosening. "It's great to see you," he said, giving her a hard kiss on the mouth and at the same time slipping her pocketbook from her shoulder. "Don't worry, baby," he said, smiling, "I'm on the level with this."

Toni wasn't a morning person. Pete knew she probably got up at six in order to arrange for the money and drive to Boston. She looked worn-out around the eyes and mouth, and it made her look so fragile that it brought a lump to Pete's throat. He gave her hand a squeeze and then took a stack of bills from her pocketbook. When he counted only seven thousand dollars, he glared at her.

"I only had five thousand saved up," she explained weakly. "I had to borrow two thousand from Charlie. He expects fifty percent return." She met Pete's glare. "I had some bad days at the track," she said defiantly.

"Did you drive the Caddy up?" he asked. Toni nodded. "All right." He held out his hand. "Give me the keys. I got some errands to run."

She shook her head. "No. If I give them to you, you're going to sell the car. Forget it."

He turned away, furious that she knew him as well as she did. "Okay, then," he announced in an aggrieved, bitter tone. "If that's how much you trust me, I'll just have to take a cab and waste our money. I hope you're satisfied." As he stormed from the room, shoving the money into his pants pocket, he heard the light twinkle of Toni's laughter and then her hands clapping in applause. "Bravo!" she called out after him as he stomped down the hotel hallway, infuriated.

By the time he got to the lobby, he had calmed down. He considered trying to convince Langley and Carbone that the robbery only netted seven thousand, but he was afraid that might tip them off. No, he was going to have to come up with the whole ten grand. He bought a newspaper and thumbed through it quickly before settling on a plan.

The pawnbroker wouldn't budge. "Three hundred," he stated stubbornly. The leather briefcase on the counter was a rich, expensive one, but Pete pointed out that it had the initials RT monogrammed on it. "So change your name," the pawnbroker offered in a flat tone.

Pete studied him. A short, stocky man with sagging basset-hound eyes. "Two hundred," Pete growled. The man started to remove the briefcase from the counter, and Pete turned towards the door. Before he got there, he heard the man offer two-fifty. Pete turned back and agreed. "You got any overcoats you can show me?" he asked.

The pawnbroker squeezed his way into a corner of the shop and rummaged through a pile of clothes before holding up a full-length black leather coat. "It's a size forty-six," he grunted, his bloodshot eyes unblinking as he studied Pete. "It should fit you."

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Pete asked for a closer look. The coat was of cheap quality. A couple of months of wear and it would start coming apart at the seams. "How much?" he asked.

"Two hundred," the stocky man said with a straight face.

Pete broke into an incredulous laugh. He took three hundred dollars from his wallet and laid it on the counter. "For the briefcase and coat. Take it or leave it."

The man looked at Pete and then the money. "Sure. Why not?" He shrugged, collecting the cash. With the coat and briefcase taken care of, the next step was to get a suit, and Pete didn't spare any expense there. He went to an exclusive men's clothes store on Newbury Street and picked out a twelve-hundred-dollar gray pinstriped number. He asked the tailor if it could be ready in an hour. The tailor shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "Maybe in three days." Pete showed him a fifty and got no reaction. He angrily added another fifty and the tailor told him the alterations would be completed in an hour.

Pete spent part of the next hour picking out a dress shirt and tie, part of it consulting the phone book, and all of it amazed at how quickly he could spend money. It was like water through his fingers. He started wondering if it was worth it. What was the point of always knocking himself out chasing after the big score? If he ever made it, he knew he'd be flat broke again a few months later.

As soon as he put on his new suit and felt the precise cut of its material, all his doubts faded. The struggle was worth it. Maybe the money would go like there was no tomorrow, but he'd have a hell of a ride while it lasted.

Pete next started out on a walking tour of Boston's fancier restaurants. He visited almost a dozen before finding what he was looking for—an unattended coat rack. He hung his cheap leather coat next to a rich, expensive one, and then called Toni, asking her to call back the restaurant and have Dr. Robert Tucker paged. Before hanging up, she congratulated him on his recent professional achievement.

A minute after he was seated his waiter came back, and noticing the RT monogrammed on his briefcase, asked if he was Dr. Robert Tucker. Pete nodded, and the waiter, handing him the restaurant's cordless phone, informed him he had an emergency call.

Pete picked up the handset and heard Toni giggling. "Oh, Doctor," she exclaimed, "this jerk I know has been giving me a royal pain in the ass. What should I do?"

"Sounds serious," he murmured. "Take two aspirin and insert them where it aches." He slammed down the phone, muttering out loud about a critical operation, and rushed from the restaurant grabbing the wrong leather coat.

"An honest mistake," he smirked to himself as he slipped it on, admiring how nice it felt. He walked briskly, waiting until he was

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a block away before hailing a cab. He had the cabbie make two stops before taking him to the dog track, one at Amalgamated Computers, where he picked up an annual report and other miscellaneous sales brochures, the second at a stationery store.

The Club, a semi-posh restaurant within the track, was a hangout for the more serious gamblers. Pete pulled aside a busboy and showed him twenty dollars. "Who's stupid and loaded?" he asked. The kid nodded towards a thick-necked man with a deep scowl. Pete took him in with a glance and liked what he saw. The man's clothes were expensive and in bad taste. He had the pasty, surly look of someone who'd been losing badly and was too stubborn to know when to quit.

Pete sat down next to the man and immediately opened his briefcase and started studying reports and jotting down random figures in a notebook. He caught the sap peering at him with a mix of annoyance and curiosity. "You figuring out some handicapping formulas?" the sap asked distrustfully.

Pete laughed. "Unfortunately, no," he said, a big friendly smile stretched across his face. "I have to finish a sales report for tomorrow morning." He stretched out his hand and introduced himself as Robert Tucker. "Vice-president of Sales at Amalgamated Computers," he added.

"The track's a funny place to do work," the sap grunted as he halfheartedly took Pete's hand. He chose not to introduce himself.

"I guess so." Pete shrugged. He took off his leather coat and draped it on the back of his chair. Outwardly he appeared oblivious to the man's snub, his smile remaining warm and friendly. "A buddy from college gave me some tips," he said with a wink.

"Is that so?" the sap replied, his eyes growing vacant as he turned away from Pete.

During the first two races Pete gave the appearance of being absorbed in his report. He noticed the sap's scowl had deepened and his betting slips had been ripped to pieces. After the sap made his bets for the third race, Pete asked him if he could watch his coat and briefcase. The sap reluctantly agreed, making a face as if he smelled bad cheese.

Pete placed fifty-dollar bets to win on every dog in the third. The cashier was going to say something but held his tongue. As he sat back down, he saw the sap staring at him. "My buddy's about ninety-percent sure on this one," he said with a big grin. The sap grunted and again wrinkled his face as if his olfactory senses were being offended.

At the end of the third race the sap crumpled his betting slips and tossed them down in disgust. Pete deftly removed the winning slip from his wallet. To the untrained eye it appeared he had only a single slip in his wallet instead of nine. He made sure the sap

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got a good look at it. "I would've bet more," Pete confided, "but my buddy is only positive about the ninth race."

The sap studied Pete with a newfound interest. "What other tips did he give you?" he asked, showing off a good pound of denture work as he forced a smile.

"Well," Pete hesitated. "Other than the ninth, he gave me a probable winner for the sixth."

"Is that so?" the sap edged forward. "What dogs does he pick?"

Pete frowned. "I'm sorry," he said, as if he really were sorry. "But I promised my buddy I wouldn't give his tips to anyone else. It could get him in trouble. I hope you understand."

"Sure, sure." A tic caused the sap's right eye to flutter uncontrollably. Pete knew the sap was dying to tell him to go to hell, but the sap fought it back and forced a brotherly smile. "You can't let a buddy down, right?"

The sap won in the fourth and then lost big in the fifth. Before the sixth, Pete again asked him to watch his coat and briefcase, and then he placed bets on every dog in the race. After the race, Pete made sure the sap caught a glance of his winning ticket.

During the next two races the sap was squirming in his seat. Every few seconds he'd look over at Pete, trying to make up his mind about something. He'd open his mouth and then shut it tight. After the eighth race, he grabbed Pete by the arm. "Come on," he pleaded. "Be a pal. Who does your friend like for the ninth?"

"I can't—"

"I need this one." His eyes were dead serious. "If I can have one big winner I'll make up for the past month. You got to help me out."

Pete let his face show a pained grimace. "How much do you want to bet?" he asked at last.

"Five thousand." The sap wet his lips.

Pete nodded slowly. "Okay," he said. "Here's how we do it so I don't break my promise to my buddy. You give me five thousand and I'll add three thousand, and we split the winnings even." Before the sap had a chance to say anything, Pete counted out three thousand dollars from his wallet. The sap handed over his five thousand.

When Pete got up, it appeared as if the sap was going to follow him. He turned to the sap and politely asked him to watch his coat and briefcase. Any argument the sap was going to propose died when he looked at the coat and briefcase. Any sap could see the coat was worth two grand and the briefcase at least another. And the briefcase contained an invaluable sales report. The sap sat down quietly, his pasty face looking slightly flustered.

Pete whistled happily as he walked past all of the betting lines. He kept walking until he was out of the track. Subtracting his expenses, he had over ten grand and a new suit left. More important, though, he had run his first successful con since coming to

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Boston. To be good at the con game you had to have confidence, and Pete had been afraid he'd lost his. Now, he could feel it surging through his blood. And nothing could beat the exhilaration of leaving a sap high and dry. As he walked, he jumped up and clicked his heels.

Pete showed up at the Italian restaurant on time. Langley was there waiting for him, a sour look on his face. When he saw Pete, he approached him and asked if things went as planned. Pete nodded and held up a paper bag he was carrying. "Had to crack his skull," Pete whispered indifferently. "But I got ten grand."

The two men sat down, Langley with a hard sneer frozen on his face, Pete looking like a man heading to the gallows. A signal was given for them to head to the back room.

Carbone was sitting alone, his large face impassive as he watched Pete enter the room. Pete sat across from him. He purposely avoided the large man's eyes. To himself, he started counting down from ten. When he got to zero, the large man exploded. "You lost my money!" he bellowed. "You stupid piece of garbage!"

"I-I'm s-sorry." Pete swallowed and tried again. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, his eyes cast down to the floor.

"You think that means anything?" Carbone demanded rhetorically.

Langley had taken the paper bag from Pete and handed it to Carbone. "Please," he interrupted. "He's deeply sorry and would like to offer this as a show of respect."

Carbone dumped the money from the bag and counted it. "This is only ten thousand dollars," he said with disbelief. "How is this showing respect?"

Pete sat quietly, trying to look as sick as possible. He couldn't help but rate the performance as poor. If he had been running the scam he would have tried to impart real fear and loathing before starting with the yelling and chest-beating. Langley argued Pete's case. "I agree he's a brainless imbecile," he implored. "But he meant no disrespect. This is all he could come up with."

Carbone had some of the money clutched in his hands. He waved it menacingly at Pete. "I look at you as garbage," he snarled. "And you know what I do to garbage? I burn and bury it!"

Pete lurched forward as if he were going to vomit and then pretended to hold it back. That sped things up. It's one thing to enjoy the last few moments of a scam, but quite another to have clothes needlessly ruined. Carbone spat on the floor. "You're not worth wasting time on," he said. "But if I ever hear of you again, I'll kill you." He grabbed a baseball bat from under the table and stood up. "I will kill you!" he yelled, reaching forward.

Pete fell back in his chair and just about crawled from the restaurant as Carbone bellowed after him. Toni was parked across

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the street and by the time he got to the Caddy he was laughing so hard he could barely talk. He plopped down on the passenger seat. "Boy," he gasped. "That was fun."

Slowly, his laughter subsided. He lowered himself in his seat so he couldn't be seen from the outside. Toni was looking at him with amusement. "I'm glad you had a good time in there," she said.

"Worth the price of admission." He saw Langley and Carbone step from the restaurant and he gave Toni a nudge with his elbow. The two men seemed to be enjoying themselves. Carbone's body convulsed in a wheezing type of laugh while Langley kidded around, his thin face displaying a big smart-alecky grin. They shook hands and separated. Pete nodded to Toni. "You take the large one. Will you be okay?"

Toni had already slid out of the car. She turned to him and flashed her killer smile. "Don't worry about me, lover," she said, her eyes shining brightly. "If I have to wrestle a dozen of him to get you to the altar, I will. See you in church."

She was wearing a tight-fitting leather skirt cut only a few inches down her thigh. Pete watched the delicious wiggle of her rear end as she approached Carbone, and felt his heart skip a beat. Toni could take care of herself. He slid over to the driver's seat, put the car into Drive, and followed Langley.

He did a lousy job tailing Langley. Not knowing the Boston streets well enough to take any chances, he stuck close behind Langley's white Oldsmobile, most of the time leaving only one car between them. Fortunately, the small man was oblivious to it. He led Pete right to a small wooden colonial in East Boston. Pete noted the address and drove off, thankful that Langley didn't live in an apartment building. An apartment building would be tougher for what he had planned.

He barely got back to his hotel room when the phone rang. It was Toni, informing him that Mr. Carbone was really Mr. Carl Boronski. "I'd put him on the phone," she said, "but I'm afraid he's tied up at the moment."

"Just you and him alone, huh?"

"Just the two of us." She hesitated, and when she continued her voice had changed, sounding almost scared. "Pete," she said. "I found the briefcase. There was thirty-three thousand dollars in it. I also found five thousand dollars on him."

"I'll be over as soon as I can." Pete got the address and hung up. He then drove back to where he had followed Langley. The house lights were off, and as he left the Caddy he took with him a roll of duct tape he'd bought earlier in the day. Standing in the darkness by the front door, Pete strained himself, trying to listen for any voices coming from within the house. Finally, he heard what sounded like a man and woman celebrating. He pounded on the door, and muffling his

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voice with his hand, shouted, "It's Carl. Open up!"

He was grinning from ear to ear when the door opened and the redhead stood in front of him in her stocking feet. As recognition hit her, her mouth gaped open, but before she could utter a peep, he had tape covering her mouth. A split second later he had her on her belly, and with his knee digging into the small of her back, wrapped both her wrists and ankles with the tape. He grinned wolfishly, studying the sheer negligee she was wearing. "Fancy finding you here," he whispered softly into her ear.

As he pulled away, he noticed she still had on the same diamond earrings. He reached down to take them and then thought better of it. Langley called down, complaining about what was taking so long. Pete moved the redhead from sight.

When Langley walked into the room, he walked straight into a hard sucker punch. Pete had put more muscle into it than he had to, and the small man crumpled onto the floor. He bound the small man's wrists and ankles, and then started searching the house.

He found the five grand he was expecting to find, and not wanting to keep Toni waiting, decided to call it quits. He used a blanket from the bedroom to transport the redhead and Langley to the trunk of his Caddy. Langley was still out cold. As he shut the trunk, the redhead glared at him furiously. For the hell of it, he hit every pothole on the way.

The address Toni had given him was for a small Colonial with an attached garage. A beat-up Volvo occupied the garage. Pete knocked on the door and gave Toni a squeeze as she let him in. She shot him a worried look. "What kept you so long?" she asked.

"Had a pickup to make. You know where the keys for the Volvo are?"

She shrugged. Pete spotted an overcoat, checked the pockets, and with a big smile, held up a set of car keys. He rolled the Volvo out onto the street, and brought the Caddy into the garage. Toni watched all of it with an impatient frown. Pete opened the Caddy trunk, and with a grunt, lifted Langley onto his shoulder. The small man had woken up and was groaning miserably.

"Well, honey," Pete winked. "You want to show me our host?" Toni stared in disbelief and then started laughing. She led the way to the upstairs bedroom. There, Carl Boronski lay on the bed, his hands and feet secured by handcuffs to brass bedposts. Besides a pair of socks that were stuffed in his mouth, the only other article of clothing he had on his body was jockey shorts. Pete raised an eyebrow at Toni. "The handcuffs were his idea!" she argued defensively.

"I'm sure they were," he answered, dropping Langley onto the bed with his partner.

Pete went back to the garage and hoisted the redhead onto his shoulder. As he carried her upstairs, Toni's eyes lit up. "You got

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yourself quite an armful," she said with a vicious smile.

"Nothing I can't handle," he responded, sidestepping a kick she had aimed at his posterior. He carried the redhead into a bathroom and dumped her in the tub. She shot him a look of pure murder. The tape across her mouth stifled the curses she tried to unleash. Pete smiled to himself, noticing that her skin had blushed a deeper red than her hair.

Toni was waiting in the hallway. "What next?" she asked.

"I'll show you."

Pete led the way back into the bedroom, and then took out his switchblade. Langley was looking awful woozy, and when he saw the opened knife, he squeezed his eyes shut. Boronski's eyes bulged as he stared at the blade. Pete walked over to Boronski and cut his jockey shorts off. He then used the knife to free Langley of his clothing.

"What's the point of that?" Toni whispered to him after he had walked back to her.

"Later, I'm going to call the cops," he said somewhat spitefully. "I want them embarrassed when the men in blue show up. Payback for trying to play me as a chump."

"And they won't tell the cops anything?"

"Not a thing." He smiled wryly. "They can't afford to, unless they want to admit to the ripoff scheme they've been running. It's going to be some show later." He broke out laughing. "The cops are going to want to know why they're naked and tied up, and our friends are going to sweat bullets trying to explain it's all one big misunderstanding. Man, I wish I could watch it. Oh, well," he showed the knife. "Can't leave our redhead overdressed."

Toni snatched the knife away. "In your dreams," she muttered out of the side of her mouth. The bathroom door slammed behind her. When she came out, she carried the remains of the redhead's negligee.

"It seems fitting," Pete offered philosophically. "That they should be stripped both figuratively and literally of their worldly possessions. And speaking of which, why don't you show me the money?"

The briefcase was in the kitchen. Looking at all the money in it made Pete's palms start to sweat. He took the five grand he had found at Langley's and added it to the briefcase. "Why don't you put this in the trunk," he told Toni, handing her the money. "I'm going to give the place a quick search."

Toni nodded. Pete knew she had already searched the house, but he checked places he knew she would've missed. Like the underside of shelves, and the back of drawers, and inside book jackets. He found three hundred dollars hidden in those spots.

Toni came back from the garage and grabbed him, pressing her slim body hard against his. She gave him a long kiss. When she pulled away her eyes sparkled. "Let's go," she said, "we got vows to

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exchange."

They walked to the garage together, hand in hand. Pete stopped suddenly and slapped himself against the forehead. "The diamond earrings!" he swore, shaking his head.

Toni gave him a questioning look. "The redhead's got diamond earrings that I want to give you as a wedding gift. I'll be right back." He turned but Toni stopped him. "I'll get them," she insisted. She gave him an odd look as she walked back into the house.

When he heard her on the stairs, he started up the Caddy and drove off. An uneasiness started to work its way into his stomach. He had almost left behind a few hundred dollars for Toni, but hell, he was leaving her the diamonds—wasn't that enough? If they turned out to be fake, she'd still find a way to get back to New York. With a body like hers, how could she not? And besides, Toni was as resourceful as they come.

Still, the look she gave him bothered him. It was something other than simple jealousy—almost like she knew what was going to happen. Well, what choice did he have? If he was going to use the money to run his Hollywood scam he had to ditch Toni.

With a little bit of luck he should be able to return ten times what was in the briefcase. Maybe even more. In six months, a year tops, he'd come back and make it up to Toni, marrying her on the spot. He'd give her a diamond so big she'd need a wheelbarrow to cart it around.

No, he rationalized, it was unfair to expect him to do anything but what he did. The Hollywood scam was finally within his reach. And also, he thought with a warm smile, so were all the beautiful and hopeful actresses he'd be meeting.

First he'd drive down South, maybe to Miami, and rest up for a few days. Work on a good suntan. Buy himself a flashy wardrobe. After that, he'd get rid of the Caddy and fly to Hollywood. And then . . .

As plans whirled through his head, any guilt he had been feeling faded. He drove until morning, finally stopping at a roadside motel in Virginia. Bleary-eyed and exhausted, he opened the trunk and stood confused, not believing his eyes. There was no briefcase. All there was was a note written in the cherry-blossom-pink lipstick Toni liked to use.

The note read: "You lousy creep. When you marry me you might see a dime of the money. Drop dead, Toni."

If he hadn't been so damn tired, Pete would've gotten a good long laugh from the whole thing. ●

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Japan's Jiro Kimura is a translator of mysteries (mainly the work of Ed Hoch and Donald Westlake) and webmaster of The Gumshoe Site.

Ellery Queen in Japan

by Jiro Kimura

When Fredric Dannay visited Japan for the first time in 1977—six years after the death of his co-author as Ellery Queen, Manfred B. Lee—he and his wife Rose were warmly welcomed. Dannay accepted many interview requests from the Japanese mass media and got a lot of ink. He also had an interesting conversation with Seicho Matsumoto, one of the best-selling mystery writers in Japan at that time.

More than half the Japanese population already knew of Ellery Queen before Dannay made that trip. Ellery Queen was famous in Japan even before World War II. The first EQ novel translated into Japanese was *The Dutch Shoe Mystery* (first published in the U.S. in 1931). It was serialized in a magazine called *Tantei Shosetsu (Detective Fiction)* in 1932, and published in book form in 1935 with a different translation. Twelve more novels by Queen and by Barnaby Ross, Dannay and Lee's other pseudonym, were translated and published in Japan before the war (some as books, some as magazine serials, some as both): *The Roman Hat Mystery* (1933); *The Greek Coffin Mystery* (1934); *The Siamese Twin Mystery* (1934); *The Chinese Orange Mystery* (1934); *The Egyptian Cross Mystery* (1934); *The Spanish Cape Mystery* (1935); *Drury Lane's Last Case* (1936); *The French Powder Mystery* (1936); *Halfway House* (1936); *The Tragedy of Y* (1937); and *The Four of Hearts* (1938). Regrettably, all of these novels were abridged, and suffered from poor translations.

After the war, other Queen novels were translated, and the poor prewar translations were reworked for the better. Eventually, all the novels by Queen and Ross became available in Japanese, and most have been continuously in print. Japanese mystery readers love old-fashioned fair-play puzzle stories. Among their favorite books from the Queen canon are the Drury Lane tetralogy (especially *The Tragedy of Y)* and the early nationality titles (especially *Dutch* and *Greek*).

Several Queen novels were dramatized for Japanese audiences. *The Tragedy of Y* was serialized as a six-part TV drama in 1978, with Koji Ishizaka in the lead role as a hearing-impaired Kabuki actor. The 1979 movie *Haitatsu Sarenai San-tsu no Tegami (The Three Undelivered Letters)*, based on the EQ novel *Calamity Town,* cast Ryo Hikime as an American student in Japan turned amateur sleuth. Dannay visited Japan for a second time in 1979 to help publicize the movie. The year 1982 saw the TV-dramatization of *Kodokuna Kariudo* (in English, *The Lonely Hunter*) from the Queen novel *Cop Out,* directed by Yoichi Jaku. Surprisingly, several Queen short **(continued on p. 63)**

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An Edgar Allan Poe Award winner for critical work, Francis Nevins is a leading authority on all aspects of the work of Ellery Queen.

The Queens of the Home Screen

by Francis M. Nevins

Two years and a few months after Ellery Queen left or rather was abandoned by radio, he resurfaced in the medium that was rapidly taking radio's place as America's favorite form of home entertainment. Producers Norman and Irving Pincus bought the television rights to the character early in 1950 and assembled the team whose job was to create a thirty-minute live episode every week. Fred Dannay and Manny Lee had no desire to grind out weekly scripts for the new medium, so the brothers put together a coterie of freelance writers like Ethel Frank, Henry Misrock, Betty Loring, and John C. Gibbs, whose efforts were overseen by story editor Eugene Burr and the producers. Brought in to direct these live dramas was Donald Richardson, who went on to helm episodes of countless TV series including *I Remember Mama, Dupont Play of the Week, The Defenders, Lost in Space,* and *The Virginian.*

The role of Ellery went to darkly handsome Richard Hart, who was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1915 and became a soccer star at Brown University, from which he graduated in 1936. After some stage experience in New England, he moved to New York City and landed his first Broadway part in *Pillar to Post* (1943). His brooding good looks captured Hollywood's attention and won him three juicy parts at MGM, respectively opposite Greer Garson, Lana Turner, and Barbara Stanwyck, in *Desire Me* (1947), *Green Dolphin Street* (1947), and *B.F.'s Daughter* (1948). At the dawn of live TV he appeared in several New York-based productions, notably as Marc Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Then came the offer from the Pincus brothers to solve small-screen murders on a weekly basis. For the role of Inspector Richard Queen the brothers recruited Florenz Ames (1889-19??), a peppery little rooster who had been appearing on the Broadway stage since 1917.

On October 19, 1950, *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* debuted on the short-lived DuMont network, occupying the Thursday evening time slot from 9:00 to 9:30 P.M. The debut episode, "The Bad Boy," was based on one of the sixty-minute scripts Fred and Manny had written for the Queen radio series back in 1939. A week later Hart and Ames solved the case of "The Mad Tea-Party," based on the 1934 tale which Fred Dannay till the end of his life ranked as his personal favorite among all the Ellery Queen short stories. Of the eleven episodes broadcast during 1950, at least seven were adapted (not by Fred and Manny) from genuine Queen short stories or radio plays. "The Hanging Acrobat" (December 21, 1950), in which Ellery

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probes the backstage murder of a trapeze star, survives on kinescope.

Less than two weeks later, Richard Hart's career came to a sudden end. On Tuesday, January 2, 1951, during rehearsal for the following Thursday's broadcast, he suffered a heart attack and died soon afterward in New York's French Hospital. On twenty-four hours' notice he was replaced by Lee Bowman (1914-1979), whose roles in Columbia films of the 'forties—notably opposite Jean Arthur in *The Impatient Years* (1944) and Rita Hayworth in *Cover Girl* (1944)—had earned him a reputation as a reliable leading man. With his urban accent and streetwise manner, Bowman's EQ was markedly different from that of the suave, sophisticated Hart. But the new image kept audiences tuned in for just short of two years, during which all the scripts were originals by the Pincuses' stable of writers. Included in the casts of various episodes were Judith Evelyn, Eva Gabor, Dennis Hoey (Inspector Lestrade from the Basil Rathbone-Nigel Bruce Sherlock Holmes films), and Anne Marno (later and better known as Anne Bancroft). A photo-story version of one Bowman segment, "The Twilight Zone" (September 13, 1951), was published in *TV Show* magazine for January 1952 and can be downloaded from your computer, and at least five others survive on kinescope. All six manifest zero interest in clues, deductions, and fair play with the viewer, and for all the resemblance he bore to the character Fred and Manny had created, Bowman's detective might as well have been named John Smith. Nevertheless, the series was highly regarded, winning a *TV Guide* award as the best mystery program of 1950-51.

What was it like to work on the show? The only Queen scripter who found success in other media was Helene Hanff (1916-1997), whose charming book *84, Charing Cross Road* (1970) was later adapted into a Broadway play and a 1987 movie, which starred Anne Bancroft and Anthony Hopkins. Hanff liked to set crime in an artsy milieu and she had Ellery solve murders at a ballet school, a ballet performance, an opera, a summer theater, an art gallery, and during a production of *The Mikado.* In a letter dated September 15, 1951, and included in *84, Charing Cross Road,* she wrote:

> I'm stuck on 95th Street writing the TV "Adventures of Ellery Queen." Did I tell you we're not allowed to use a lipstick-stained cigarette for a clue? We're sponsored by the Bayuk Cigar Co. and we're not allowed to mention the word "cigarette." We can have ashtrays on the set, but they can't have any cigarette butts in them. They can't have cigar butts either, they're not pretty. All an ashtray can have in it is a wrapped, unsmoked Bayuk cigar.

The series stayed in its Thursday evening slot (except for an eight-week summer hiatus) until early December 1951, then moved to the ABC network and was seen Sundays from 7:30 to 8:00 P.M., sponsored by the auto manufacturer Kaiser-Frazer, under whose aus-

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pices the sleuths and suspects began smoking up a cigarette storm. After thirteen weeks the show left the air for a month, returning to ABC in mid April 1952 in the 9:00 P.M. Wednesday time slot with a new sponsor, Phillies Cigars. The Pincus brothers continued to produce, Donald Richardson to do most of the directing, the same stable of writers to turn out the weekly scripts, and Bowman and Ames to play the Queens. After the final episode (November 26, 1952) the time slot was taken over by local basketball games.

Two years later, the Pincuses formed Norvin Productions, a small independent company, and put the formerly live series on film as *The New Adventures of Ellery Queen* (1955-56). Signed as Ellery was none other than Hugh Marlowe (1911-1982), the first actor to play the part on radio. Florenz Ames came back as Inspector Queen, and at least half of the thirty-two *New Adventures* were based on scripts from the Bowman era. Most episodes were directed by old B-movie hands like Ray Nazarro and Harold Schuster, and the casts included Elisha Cook, Jr., Sherry Jackson, Peter Van Eyck, and Brian Keith. As in the live series, classic detection is conspicuous by its absence and, though still gifted with a beautiful voice, Marlowe's Ellery bore little resemblance to the master sleuth loved by readers—and by listeners when he'd played the same part on radio.

Three seasons later, a new and more ambitious attempt was made to turn Ellery into a home-screen star. *The Further Adventures of Ellery Queen* (1958-59) was seen on the NBC network, live and (if you were one of the handful who owned a color set) in color, under the supervision of Albert McCleery, one of the top producers of 'fifties teledrama. For the first twenty weeks Ellery was played by George Nader (1921-2002), a hunk of beefcake in the Tony Curtis mold who had starred in Universal films like *Man Afraid* (1957) and *Flood Tide* (1958) and, in the 'sixties, relocated to Germany, where he played FBI agent Jerry Cotton in a series of pseudo-James Bond flicks. McCleery admitted in a *TV Guide* interview that he'd never read a Queen novel or story, but claimed that his ignorance was irrelevant because "of all the Queen material, we can use only four of the novels." In fact he used six. "We're going to spend money for scripts and actors," he continued, "not costly props and sets." But the acting turned out to be adequate at best and the scripts abominable. Six of the first eight segments were very freely adapted from Queen novels. The debut episode, "The Glass Village" (September 26, 1958), was surprisingly good—with Johnny Shinn, the lead character in this non-series novel, replaced of course by Ellery—but the other five were awful. The remaining fourteen episodes with Nader in the lead were based on novels by a wide variety of American mystery novelists including Harold Q. Masur, William P. McGivern, Hillary Waugh, John Roeburt (who was story editor for the series), and Edgar Box (the mystery-writing pseudonym of Gore Vidal). Shoehorning

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Ellery into these scripts as a substitute for radically different detectives like Masur's Scott Jordan and Box's Peter Sargeant did little to improve the show's quality.

After twenty weeks Nader left the series and was replaced by Lee Philips (1927-1999), who played Ellery as a man of awareness and compassion, much closer to the conception of the character in the Queen novels of the 'forties and 'fifties. The series switched from live performances to videotape and the policy of adapting miscellaneous mystery novels was scrapped in favor of original scripts. The first of Philips' dozen episodes, "Shadow of the Past" (February 27, 1959), struck me at the time as superb, but despite the fine actors who consistently appeared in the series—Conrad Nagel, Ruth Warrick, Alexander Scourby, Martin Balsam, Judith Evelyn, Wayne Morris, Glenda Farrell, Leueen MacGrath, Hurd Hatfield, and Morey Amsterdam, just to name a few—none of the subsequent eleven matched the premiere in quality. The final episode, "This Murder Comes to You Live" (June 5, 1959), was written by Ben Hecht, who also played Alonzo Christian, a flamboyant poet murdered on a live TV talk show with Ellery in the studio. Featured in the cast were Geraldine Fitzgerald, Ray Walston, and Buster Crabbe.

During the 1960s Ellery made no new appearances on the small screen, but Queen's "Terror Town" (*Argosy,* August 1956; collected in *The Tragedy of Errors,* 1999), a non-series novella about a series of violent deaths on the exact same spot near a New England hamlet, was adapted for *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* as "Terror in Northfield" (October 11, 1963). Harvey Hart directed from a script by Leigh Brackett which moved the action to a small town in California and, dropping most of the detection in Queen's novella, stressed suspense, as did Bernard Herrmann's excellent music score. The puzzled deputy sheriff, the menaced local librarian, and the mad farmer were played respectively by Dick York, Jacqueline Scott, and R.G. Armstrong.

Early in the 1970s Universal Pictures made plans to return Ellery to America's living rooms. A two-hour pilot film was shot and the series almost made it to prime time but was dumped at the last minute in favor of the Rock Hudson-Susan Saint James *McMillan and Wife.* The pilot, *Don't Look Behind You,* based on Queen's 1949 novel *Cat of Many Tails,* was broadcast as a TV movie on November 19, 1971. Peter Lawford played Ellery as a mod Londonesque swinger with silver-streaked hair down to the eyebrows and a veddy British accent, while Harry Morgan with his Brooklyn twang was cast as Richard Queen: not Ellery's father but, in the cockeyed hope of explaining their incongruous accents, his uncle! Featured in the cast were E.G. Marshall, Skye Aubrey, and Stefanie Powers. Ted Leighton's script attempted to update by twenty years a novel, probably Queen's finest, which is inextricably rooted in the milieu of the late forties. The novel's rich characterizations were reduced to cardboard in the process and director Barry Shear

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added several routine action-suspense sequences without counterparts in the novel, but at least the bare bones of the plot were not broken and the budget was higher than for any Queen-based film before. Fred Dannay told me that on the whole he liked it.

A few years later, another feature-length Queen pilot was filmed, this time under the auspices of the producer-writer team of Richard Levinson and William Link, who at age twenty had made their debut as authors with "Whistle While You Work" (*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* November 1954). In the pilot film, directed by David Greene and simply called *Ellery Queen,* Levinson and Link backdated Queen's 1965 novel *The Fourth Side of the Triangle* to the late 1940s but preserved its structure intact and even in some ways improved on it. Fashion designer Monica Grey is murdered in her penthouse, pulling out the plug of her TV set and clock as a cryptic dying message (an element not in the novel). Chief suspects are her Thursday-evening lover, financier Carson McKell (Ray Milland), and McKell's jealous wife (Kim Hunter) and hot-tempered son (Monte Markham), each of whom in turn is charged with and then cleared of the murder. Ellery uses anagram clues to uncover a fourth theory and then, after issuing a most Queenlike "challenge to the viewer," turns the dying message into the keystone of a fifth and final solution. David Wayne (1914-1995) was properly crusty as Inspector Queen but Jim Hutton (1934-1979) portrayed Ellery not as a dynamo of intellectual excitement and detached compassion but rather as a nearsighted young stumblebum, forever misplacing his glasses and bumping into people and objects as if he were a live-action Mr. Magoo. Clearly the Levinson-Link version of Ellery owed all too much to the producers' previous creation, the immortal Lieutenant Columbo.

Queen purists weren't happy with the decision to turn Ellery into a diffident sloucher, but it was Hutton's pleasantly vacuous performance that sold the series, and in the fall of 1975 *Ellery Queen* returned to prime time on NBC after seventeen years' absence. The series consisted of twenty-two episodes, set in the late 1940s like the pilot. Each sixty-minute film boasted big-name guest stars: Joan Collins, Ray Walston, Farley Granger, Barbara Rush, and Guy Lombardo just in the first episode. The night that segment was broadcast, Dannay happened to be home alone. "When I saw [Hutton] on the screen," he said later in an interview with *Playboy,* "I had the most curious reaction. I had the feeling I was seeing myself, years and years ago." The series featured a satisfying number of attempts to play fair with the viewer and several delightful continuing characters like Simon Brimmer (John Hillerman), the pompous radio supersleuth with an infallible genius for coming up with the wrong solutions to murders outside the studio. After the first seven episodes, Jim Hutton shed his klutziness and began to play Ellery as a more human detective. All but one of the twenty-two segments

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were from original scripts. The single exception was "The Mad Tea Party" (October 30, 1975), which for my money is the finest filmed Queen ever. Director James Sheldon and scriptwriter Peter S. Fischer were faithful to the plot of Queen's classic 1934 short story (see p.79 this issue) but changed the names of several suspects so as to evoke some famous Golden Age mystery writers—Spencer Lockridge, Howard Biggers, Mrs. Allingham—and managed to improve on Queen's original by providing a rationale for its single logical loophole.

Fred Dannay told me that the series drew as many as twenty million viewers a week. Unfortunately, the networks don't consider such numbers sufficient, and Ellery was taken off the air after a single season. That was almost thirty years ago, and there's been nothing since. What a shame! Considering the high quality and huge success of the Inspector Morse films, I'm amazed that there hasn't been a cycle of two-hour TV movies set in the 1930s and based on early Queen novels like *The Greek Coffin Mystery* and *The Egyptian Cross Mystery,* which have never been adapted to any medium. Someday perhaps there will be. Is anyone in La-La-Land listening? ●

Ellery Queen in Japan **(continued from p. 57)**

stories were transformed into "manga" (Japanese comics).

Ellery Queen influenced a great number of Japanese mystery writers ranging from veteran writers such as Tetsuya Ayukawa and Shizuko Natsuki to fairly young writers such as Rintaro Norizuki, Arisu Arisugawa, Kaoru Kitamura, Reito Nikaido, and Masaya Yamaguchi.

Ellery Queen was also a well-known editor in Japan. A Japanese edition of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* was published by Hayakawa Publishing from 1956 to 1977, and taken over by Kobunsha Publishing from 1978 to 1999.

The Ellery Queen Fan Club was founded in 1980 by Masatoshi Saito, an avid Queen fan, and meets three times a year in the Tokyo metropolitan area. It publishes a triannual "clubzine" entitled *Queendom* in which scholarly articles as well as light essays and parodies by its members appear, complete with illustrations.

Several scholarly books on Ellery Queen have also been published in Japan. In December 2004, *The Ellery Queen Perfect Guide* was brought out to commemorate the Queen centenary. Masatoshi Saito (using his pseudonym Iiki Yusan, a pun on EQ III, "san" in Japanese meaning three) compiled its contents with the help of EQFC members. It contains not only summaries of all the EQ novels and story collections but articles on many aspects of the Queen canon. Two Japanese mystery magazines also put out special issues featuring Queen in honor of the centenary: the February issue of *Mysteries!* (from Tokyo Sogensha) and the Summer issue of *Giallo* (from Kobunsha).

While most of the Queen novels are, unfortunately, out of print in the U.S., almost all of the books are in print in Japan. It's likely, therefore, that more young Japanese readers know Queen and read his fiction than their American counterparts. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

A Threatened Species

by Barbara Cleverly

I knew I shouldn't be doing this. It was against all the firm's safety rules to enter a deserted church, at dusk, alone.

I was due to inspect the place the next day anyway, in the morning sunshine and the comforting presence of Ben Crabtree, the county of Suffolk's best ancient buildings contractor. So why couldn't I wait? Why was I creeping, ankle-deep in rotting Wilton, along the aisle, jumping at every owl hoot and mouse rustle, torch in one hand, mobile phone in the other, and the firm's hard hat on my head?

I'm a romantic, I suppose, and I love old buildings in all their different moods. I'd come to catch what might well be the grace notes of the splendour of All Souls, adrift in the fields outside the village of Crowden. It would be my five-year survey tomorrow that would sign the death warrant for this once-lovely building. It had been disused for years and the grants of money, never generous enough, had finally run out. The fabric was considered dangerous and it was inevitable that the bulldozers would roll. The only people vocal in its support were the Bat Group.

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"But the pipistrelles!" they shrieked. "They're a protected species! Their habitat must not be demolished!"

"I've nothing against bats, but I'd like to slap a closing order on their support groups!" I'd said to my boss when he handed me the church file with a warning. "The Barmy Bat Army! That chairman of theirs! Lady What's 'Er Name . . ."

"Frampton," supplied Charles. "Laetitia Frampton."

"Yes. Well, the lady gave me a very bad time over Mendlesett Church last year. I don't fancy another encounter just yet."

"Oh, I don't know," said Charles vaguely. "I suppose the bats are worth saving. Never seen it myself, but they do say the twilight flight of bats out of the church tower is one of the sights of Suffolk. They were still firmly in place when the last quinquennial inspection was done. Byam did it. Now *he* seemed to get on all right with the lovely Laetitia." Charles rolled his eyes in a meaningful way. "They spent quite some time observing the habits of our leather-winged friends in remote church towers all over the county, I seem to remember."

"Byam? Byam who? Or should I say, who Byam?"

"Ah . . . He left a couple of years before you arrived. Byam Somersham. Good architect . . . but . . . Anyway, he left the country soon after this bit of work. Went to Spain . . . or was it Portugal?"

I'd been passing on the main road on the way home from a job in Norfolk and had suddenly caught sight of the tower of All Souls silhouetted against a darkening blood-red sky, streaked with saffron. One of those vivid late-summer sunsets we get just after harvesting. I couldn't resist. *I'll just poke my head inside,* I told myself, turning into the driveway to the church. *Might be in time to witness the twilight flight of the pipistrelles.*

I watched the shadows lengthen under the stand of ancient oaks which gathered protectively, still wearing their dark leaf canopy, around the secluded stones, but no bats flew out to greet me.

And here I was, giving in to temptation and enjoying the guilty frisson of going against all common sense and Charles's firm rules. I paused to sit on the back row of pews to say a silent prayer for the building, as I always did, and then went on down the aisle, sorrow-

Barbara Cleverly's first book was published in England in 2001 (in the U.S. in 2002) and enjoyed immediate success. Entitled *The Last Kashmiri Rose,* it became a *NY Times* Notable Book of the Year. She has, to date, employed the detective from that novel (set in 1920s India) in four more books. The third in the series won CWA's Ellis Peters Historical Dagger last year; the fourth in U.S. publication is *The Palace Tiger* (Carroll & Graf). †

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ful for the poor condition of the fabric, the boarded-up windows, the cracked masonry, the water stains running down the plastered walls.

And then I heard it. A trickle of sound at first, growing louder and more insistent: the chirping, twittering, agitated noise that bats make when they're about to take off. I decided to find out where they were roosting. If I was quick enough, I might actually see them emerge from their holes in the rafters or window dressings. I hurried silently back down the nave to the bell tower. The door was swinging open. Checking the state of the staircase with my torch, I was relieved to see that this bit of the fabric at least had been replaced since the Middle Ages. It was of stout steel. Not pretty, but a tug and a kick convinced me it was firm. I began to climb. I planned to go as far as the first floor but no farther than that. Too risky. Up on the platform, the noise of the bats was louder. Would the light of my torch disturb them? I shone it anyway over the floor. Stout oak floorboards, complete, and no holes down which I might stick a foot. There were hundreds of bats tuning up in the woodwork all around me and, I guessed, in the very top floor above my head, thousands more. Not too late, then.

I shone the torch upwards from my feet. No staircase to the top floor. A very old oak ladder reached upwards to the trapdoor giving access to the bell tower. I ran the beam along it to check its condition. There was no chance I would climb that tonight, but if it was obviously rickety I would ask Ben to bring a ladder with him tomorrow and impress him with my forethought.

Looking up, I became aware of a darker shadow amongst the shadows of the raftered roof. As I watched, it moved gently with a sudden gust of wind through a broken pane.

I leaned against the ladder to steady myself, unable to look away.

Above my head a huge black shape was suspended, life-sized, vampirelike. A stiff cape flapped in another gust. With a mew of fear audible even over the noise of the bats, I held my torch in both hands, lighting up the horror dangling above my head. Life-sized, yes, because this thing had once been human and alive. Legs and feet hung from the cloak, arms reached upwards, truncated, caught under the heavy trapdoor. I forced myself to light the face. This was no pallid, bloodstained Dracula mask of horror films but—no less terrifying to me—I saw leathery features which might have lain, undiscovered for millennia, in an Egyptian sarcophagus or been hauled, as brown as the enveloping earth, from the depths of a peat bog.

I gulped and, as people do when frightened out of their wits, I said something very silly, just to hear the human sound of my own voice. "Byam? Byam Somersham? Could that possibly be you?"

At that moment, with a rush and a high-pitched whirring, the whole population of bats poured from holes in every part of the

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tower. They surged into the air, zipping and diving past me, and I flapped at them in panic, groping my way back to the head of the stairs. I was grateful to hear the clang of my boots on the steel treads as I scrambled down. I ran out to my Golf and, still shaking, dialled up a number on my mobile phone.

"Inspector Jennings? I wonder if you remember me? It's Ellie Hardwick here. I'm at All Souls' Church near Crowden and something awful's happened!"

Richard Jennings of the Eastern Counties CID groaned. "I'm just going off duty and I don't think I want to hear this. What *is* it with you and churches? Oh, go on, then. . . ."

He listened silently as I burbled on, ending dramatically with, ". . . Inspector . . . it's every architect's nightmare—getting themselves caught up in one of those trapdoors! In a deserted church . . . no one to hear you scream . . . your phone's in your pocket and you can't get to it . . ." And, with an increasing hysteria I didn't like to hear: "And you know no one's going to come near the building for another five years! It's Byam, isn't it? Byam Somersham?"

"Calm down and I'll get straight out to you," said Jennings. "Don't move from your car! Have you got a flask of coffee in there? Good. Keep some for me. Ten minutes."

Cocooned in the lights of my car with an upbeat jazz album playing and the windows fogging over with coffee fumes, I managed to get my teeth to unclench and my hands to stop trembling by the time the police car drew up. The inspector was by himself. He slid into the passenger seat, a large, masculine presence, took my cup from me, and drained my coffee. He listened again to my story, nodding quietly.

Finally, "I've been on the phone with headquarters on the way here," he said. "Spoke to someone in Missing Persons. Your bloke Somersham was reported to them nearly five years ago. By his wife. But then she had to withdraw the notice because he turned up in Spain." He paused for a moment, thoughtful. "His car was found abandoned at Stansted airport. And he sent her a postcard on her birthday from Barcelona. He's sent one every year since he went off. CID checked. Date stamped in Spain. Certified husband's handwriting. A constable was actually on hand at the letterbox to intercept one on delivery. At the lady's request. So that was that. No case. We'll have to look further. Floating cloak, you say, on the body? Ecclesiastical gear? What's the odds that a vicar's gone missing lately, wearing one of those what-do-you-call-'ems?"

"Surplice? No, it's much shorter than that. Like . . . an old-fashioned policeman's cape . . ."

"Eh? Good Lord!" said Jennings.

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The inspector's torch was more powerful than mine but I stayed as close to him as I could without inviting comment.

"You don't have to do this, you know," he said when we reached the ladder. "Leave it to me."

"I'm coming with you," I said, and began to climb after him. "Don't worry. I won't touch anything I haven't already touched."

We stood together gazing in silence at the corpse. The brighter light of the police torch revealed further horrors. Now I saw that the dead face was even more appalling than I'd guessed from my first startled look. It didn't have the dreamy, at-rest quality of a bog-burial or a Pharaoh: The eyes had been picked out long ago by the carrion crows that haunted the fields around, and accusing black holes were trained down on us; the shoulders were stained with trailing white patches of pigeon droppings. It had the macabre force of a medieval execution, the look of a body left to rot away on a gibbet.

And that was odd, I thought.

And not the only odd detail. "Look at his shoes," I whispered. "Under all that dust those are smart shoes, practically unworn. He didn't walk three miles in those. He drove here. So, if this is Byam, who took his car to the airport and why didn't they come forward when he disappeared?" I shuddered at the implication.

Jennings put an arm protectively around my shoulders and I didn't shrug it away. I'd noticed that, in spite of its strength, the arm was quivering. I think he was glad of my company.

Half an hour later, several urgent phone calls had produced a squad of professionals and I had lost the inspector to the well-oiled police machine as it took over, reducing the gothic horror of the setting to an arc-lamp-illuminated, plastic-taped, sanitised crime scene.

He paused by my car to say, "You can go home now, Ellie, and I'll take your statement in the morning. Probably no more than a grisly accident, we think, but I'll call by your office at—say—nine? You'll have to put off your survey for a while, of course. Oh, your first guess was right, by the way. His hard hat's abandoned in the upper tower . . . wallet in his pocket had his driving licence and cards in it. . . . It *was* Byam Somersham."

By the time Ben Crabtree, our builder, arrived at the office, I'd spent an hour studying the Crowden file. Richard Jennings had given me his automatic "Just leave it to the experts" speech but I was hardly listening. And in this field I counted myself an expert anyway. Ben hurried in, stunned and excited in equal measures by the brief outline I'd given him on the phone. After a few minutes of, "Corst, blast! Who'd ever 'a thought it? So the old devil got his comeuppance! That trap's lined with ten-pound lead, did you know that, Ellie? Accident waiting to happen! Poor old sod, though . . . awful way to go . . . " we settled down, file open on the desk

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between us, coffee mugs at elbow, to a gossipy discussion of the dead architect and his work. Strangely, Ben had most to say about the man himself.

His broad, honest Suffolk face clouded and he looked at me shiftily. "Don't want to speak ill of the dead, but . . . he were a right lot of no good, yon chap, Ellie. Fair architect—no denying *that*—but no good to the firm or any firm, for that matter. We all said it when he went off—'Good riddance!'"

"That's a bit harsh, Ben. Why do you say that? Oh, come on, you can't leave it there!"

"Not to be trusted with the . . . er . . . female clients, shall I say?" he finally confided.

"Really! Attractive man, was he?"

"Oh, yers, I'll say. Even *I* could see it!"

This was quite an admission from the aggressively masculine Ben. And as far as he was prepared to go. Suffolk people are nothing if not discreet and unjudgmental, and I was going to hear no more gossip from Ben.

Not so with Charles, though. Hurrying through the office at that moment, he hesitated, picking up his bag. "Attractive, you say? Byam? Good-looking bloke, but it was his manner more than anything. He'd look at a woman—very long eyelashes he had, I remember—as if she was the only woman in the world and, do you know, at that moment he very likely thought so . . . And he could make 'em laugh. He'd have made *you* laugh, Ellie. You'd be surprised how many female clients suddenly decided to splash out on an extension so long as *he* was the architect in charge! I must say—he certainly brought the work in!"

Charles carried on, oblivious of our disapproval, "Vain bloke, though! Lord, how the man fancied himself! Snappy dresser and always wore a suit to work. But that cloak! Used to whisk about in it something sickening! He thought it made him look dashing—and the trouble is, it damned well did! While the rest of us were muddling about on mucky sites in plastic Andy-Pandy suits for protection, he'd be swishing about looking like some sort of superhero. The blokes on-site used to laugh, but the women loved it because he could carry it off! Anyway, whatever he had, it worked."

He looked thoughtful for a moment and added, "No . . . they don't make them like that anymore."

"Sounds like a species we can well do without," I said crisply. "He had a wife hereabouts, didn't he?"

"Catherine. Poor Catherine. Lovely Catherine. Still lives in the village. No one could understand why she put up with him and his goings-on. But she always maintained he'd come back. Showed everyone postcards she got from him in Spain every year. 'It's just a question of time,' she says. 'He's working out there. He'll be back

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when he's made his reputation.' Not that she couldn't have done well for herself, either. She's had a bloke in the background for years. Gentleman-farmer type. Scott. Have you heard of him?"

I nodded. Handsome, middle-aged, and perpetually broke, Tony Scott was quite a figure in the village. A single man since his divorce, he was rumoured to be paying out large alimony bills. I'd never connected him with the artistic Catherine Somersham with her eyes always dreamily on the middle distance. I'd seen her at village street fairs, I'd even bought one of her paintings, but had never met her.

Charles went off with a cheery, "Say hello to the Plod for me . . . sorry I can't stay, but it's you they want to see, Ellie."

Ben and I turned to the quinquennial survey carefully typed and filed and I raised a question that had occurred to me even while gazing at the leathery corpse. "Look, I don't know much about the state of dead bodies, and no doubt the pathologist will have answers but, Ben, how do you think it could have been preserved like that for five years? Didn't putrefaction occur? You were the appointed builder at the time, I see; can you remember what the weather was like that summer?"

Ben's jaw dropped and he began to stir excitedly. "That were hot. Days and days of heat. Best harvest for years, they say. And the autumn, the same. Do you think he might have been . . . well . . . kippered? Swinging about up there like an Orford smokie?"

"Could be. We'll ask Jennings when he arrives. But something else puzzled me, Ben. . . . I'd have expected the body to have . . . um . . . fallen apart . . . been eaten away by insects. Wouldn't you?"

Ben considered for a moment. "Look on page one, there should be something about preexisting conditions . . . there—look."

His splayed thumb indicated a paragraph and I read, " ' . . . extensive anti-infestation treatment carried out on all woodwork . . . insecticidal fluids . . . ' Mmm . . . Heavy-duty stuff. And the tower was sprayed. Small space—Byam prudently says he put the inspection off for a couple of days to allow the fumes to dissipate. I see. Are you thinking that any winged creatures that might have been interested in a body would have been knocked cold by the treatment?"

"It's possible, I'd have thought."

There was a screech of gravel outside and Jennings strode into the office. He looked refreshed this morning and as brisk and bright as I remembered. He'd never met Ben before and I introduced the two men, explaining the builder's role in the Byam Somersham saga.

" . . . So, accidental death is what it seems to have been. A cracked skull caused instant death. He didn't suffer, Ellie," the inspector was concerned to tell me. "It looks as though he was coming down from the upper bell tower (though what the hell he was doing up there when the survey job was complete, I've no idea), missed his footing on the ladder, and dropped the trap he

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was holding up over his head. It crashed down—did you know it was lead-lined?—of course you did—sorry. It bashed in the back and top of his head . . . here . . . " He picked up a file and demonstrated on Ben's head. "Killed him at once and trapped his arms, which were still extended over the lip of the hole."

"We were wondering why the body didn't disintegrate and drop," I said tentatively. "In fact, we've had some ideas."

"To start with the most obvious thing—his suit was of very good quality, a light summer fabric but strong enough to sustain the weight of his body until it . . . well, until we found it. To go on—we think putrefaction didn't occur because of the exceptional weather . . . "

"All those hot harvest days and it was well ventilated up there. Not one of those louvred windows is intact. 'Kippered' is what Ben's saying."

"Right. Yes. Well done." He fished about in his briefcase and produced an e-mail printout. "Forensic entomologists—that's grub experts to you—are a bit puzzled, though," he said. "This is just a preliminary statement—work could take days—but they're not able to find a great deal . . . "

"Ah. We think we can help you there!" Ben and I exchanged smug looks.

After Ben left, Jennings "You'd better call me Richard" stayed on for a second cup of coffee. There was an uneasiness about him and I sensed that he still had questions. He didn't know whether to grill me in his role of interrogator or chat to me as a helpful assistant, so I made it easy for him by launching into a few questions of my own.

"What was he doing up there when the report was finished and had been handed in for typing? Look here. Charles is very old-fashioned and doesn't yet quite trust modern technology. Oh, it's all on computer, but he keeps the original dictated tapes just in case. Someone told him a bolt of lightning can have a dire effect on your hard drive, since when it's been belt and braces." I showed him a plastic bag which had been filed next to the document. I took out the small Dictaphone cassette it contained. "I've checked it and you should perhaps have this, but it's nothing more than the architect's survey. This is what may be important." I peeled the small pink Post-it note from the back of the cassette. "It says, 'Bats! A.S. Ch. 8 P.M.' He'd forgotten to inspect the bat accommodation. No reference to it in the body of the report. I think he probably went back as an afterthought to check up on the colony."

"A.S.?"

"All Souls, the name of the church."

"Of course. I'd better take those. Yes, thanks, Ellie. This all begins to fall into place. Except . . . "

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"Those postcards to his wife? He can't have sent them. Who did? Is Catherine lying? What's going on?"

Jennings looked uncomfortable. "I called on the widow last night and broke the news. She seemed distressed and horrified, I'd say. She stuck to her story about the cards . . . she keeps them in a row on her mantelpiece . . . And, as the authenticity was corroborated by the police—what can I say? It's all a bit awkward."

Carefully, I said, "I was thinking that, on behalf of the firm, I'd go along to see Catherine and express our condolences. A bunch of flowers, perhaps . . . What do you think, Richard?"

He grinned. "I think that would be a good idea, Ellie. She teaches art at the local college. You'll probably find you have a lot in common."

He turned to me as he left, his hand on the doorknob. "Oh, if you get into a girlie chat with her, you might ask how she's going to spend the two hundred grand."

"The two hundred grand?"

"Life-insurance policy. She'd kept up the payments on her husband's life." He paused and added thoughtfully, "I always think it should be called a 'death-insurance policy,' don't you?"

Catherine Somersham's greeting when she answered the door of the Old Mill House (conversion by Byam, I guessed) was warm. She even knew my name. I stood uncertainly on the doorstep, almost hidden behind a generous armful of white arum lilies.

"Come in! It is Ellie Hardwick, isn't it? You work with Charles? I'm just making some tea, will you have one? I won't say, 'Oh, you shouldn't have,'" she said gracefully, taking the lilies, "because these are my favourites! Flowers *are* a sort of consolation, you know. And consolation is still, even after five years, much needed."

While she went to put them in water I cast an eye around the living room and began to relax. I find anything minimal bleak and soulless, and this room was the very opposite of minimal. It defied any label—I doubt Catherine was the kind of woman who cared about style—and she would probably have laughed if I'd suggested "bohemian-chic." It looked as though she had just collected into the room everything she admired or found comfortable. White sofas covered in coarse linen, wooden floors with Scandinavian rugs scattered over, books spilling over from shelves no longer equal to the task of housing them, white walls, and, everywhere, paintings, not all her own.

The conversation was surprisingly easy and led on from my genuine and enthusiastic comments on the painting I'd bought at the previous year's village art festival. She invited me to look at the other pictures on the walls and, while on my feet, I took the opportunity of strolling to the fireplace and admiring a bronze turn-of-

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the-century figure of a little dancer on the mantelpiece.

"No! It can't be a Degas, I know that! But it's the next best thing!"

"It's my great-grandmother."

"She sculpted this?"

"Oh, no, sorry! She was the model. My great-grandfather did it." She smiled.

I replaced it carefully, then hastily began picking up the pile of postcards my manoeuvrings had scattered.

"Oh dear!" I said in tones of mock horror. "I wouldn't have taken you for an admirer of modern architecture. . . . Spanish, is it? . . . Yes, these two are in Barcelona—a couple of Gaudi's best . . . then the Guggenheim Museum? The Sant Jordi Sports Palace? Not my favourite!"

"Nor mine," she said easily. "You can look at them if you want to. They're postcards Byam wrote." She chewed her bottom lip for a moment, started to say something, sighed, and then took the plunge. "Ellie, I don't know what to do! Oh, do you mind my laying this on you? You'll wonder what on earth you've walked into!"

I made encouraging noises and she went on haltingly, "I've been fooling the police and now they know it. That nice inspector who came last night saw straight through the rubbish I was telling him. I'm not a good liar, and I think he's pretty smart. What on earth can I say to them? I think they might be going to arrest me."

"It's never a bad idea to tell the truth. That inspector you saw . . . Jennings? . . . he's halfway human. He would listen. I could give you his number, if you like. Er . . . if it would help to rehearse it, see how it comes out, I'd gladly listen."

I put on my receptive face. Not difficult, as I was eager to hear, and she responded by launching straight into her story.

"Five years ago when Byam disappeared, I was left in limbo. Not a word. No note. He'd told me he was due some leave and he was going off for a few days by himself." She glanced at me, her expression one of mixed defiance and shame. "He did that occasionally. It was a price I paid . . . not happily but with a certain resignation, I suppose. But this time, none of the local ladies he'd had an affair with had gone missing in a companionable way."

I looked at her, startled by her cold rationality.

Misinterpreting this, she said hastily, "Oh, *you* weren't . . . surely you . . . ?"

"I never met the man," I said firmly. "I've only been working in the village three years."

She took a photograph from a table and handed it to me. "Meet him now," she said quietly.

Even from the photograph, the quality of the man leapt out. Not classically handsome, I thought, but I'd have turned in the street to look at him and speculate. Humorous, clever, and interested is

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what he looked. It made last night's horror even more of an obscenity.

She took the photograph from me and sat holding it in her lap while she continued. "Shortly after he went off, I had a very good reason to insist that he was still alive at least. I didn't want to be a widow, and I didn't want to get a divorce. Two years before, we'd had a holiday in Spain and he'd bought and written out some postcards to friends and family and, as usual, he handed them to me to do the donkey work—'Here, Cath, you'll remember the addresses. You can finish these off.' Well, I rebelled. I didn't bother. They just came back home with us in the luggage. When I wanted to prove he was still alive, I remembered them. I took five or six of them over to a place I know in Spain and paid the hotel manager to post them to me on a given date, one a year. I put them each in a typed envelope. The police believed me because—well, why wouldn't they? I was saying what they wanted to hear. They must have been expecting me to try to prove he was *dead* because of the life-insurance policy. But I needed my husband to be *alive*. For personal reasons."

I was about to encourage her to enlarge on this when a Range Rover tore down the drive and parked in front of the house. A florid-faced man got out and hurried straight in. I noted with distaste that he had a bottle of champagne in the capacious pocket of his waxed jacket.

"Cathy! Cathy! Have you seen the news? Accidental death is what they're saying. Oh, who's this? Didn't realise you had company." He looked around in a stagey way for my car.

"I walked. I work in the village."

Catherine performed the introductions. "My neighbour, Tony Scott."

He stood glaring at me, willing me to leave. He was too large for the room, he'd left muddy prints on the shining floor, he smelled of diesel, and he frightened me.

"Pleased to have met you, Mr. Scott," I lied with a sweet smile, "but I must dash. Oh! Before I go! Nearly forgot, Catherine! The name of that new hairdresser . . . I like to support local initiatives, don't you?" I confided as I scribbled. "Ask for Ricardo at Hairtique," and added his mobile number.

Catherine smiled and nodded. "Quite right, Ellie. Thank you for coming. I'll take your advice," she said.

"It's so obvious why she's been deceiving people like that," I said to Richard over a pint in the Angel that night. "That Scott won't take no for an answer. She's been doing a Penelope."

"A what?"

"Odysseus's wife! Repelling suitors by insisting her old man's still alive. Just taking an awfully long time to get back from the

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Trojan War. Penelope promised to marry one of the brigands who were after her fortune as soon as she'd finished a bit of weaving she was doing. But at night she used to creep down and unpick what she'd done in the daytime. Delaying tactics! Spun it out for years! Catherine's house must be worth a bob or two, and now you tell me she's due to get a large sum from the insurance company. Tony's well known to be a bit short of cash . . . well—there you are. He's been putting pressure on her. Won't take no for an answer. You know the type. He worried me, Richard. He's a ball of pent-up violence. You're not to go near him." I stopped abruptly and bit my lip.

"I'll be sure to keep my styling scissors ready in my back pocket," he grinned.

"You'll just have to forgive her. All she's done is waste police time, isn't it?"

"I'll forgive your new friend if you'll do something for me," he said mysteriously. "Would you mind presenting yourself back at the scene tomorrow morning? Something I want to check on."

"Never had the Law at my feet before." I almost giggled with nerves at the sight of Richard's body, facedown, on the dusty floor of the tower.

"Get on with it, Ellie," he grumbled. "My helmet's conveniently over there in the corner, you've coshed me on the head with one of those planks that litter the floor. I'm dead. Now pull me towards the trapdoor."

"Ankles or knees, Richard?"

"Take your pick."

I tugged him by the ankles, and to my surprise his body moved easily with the grain of the boards to the hatch. Gingerly I climbed halfway down the ladder and pulled him after me. When I'd got him balanced with the weight of his upper body still bearing on the lip of the hole, steadying him firmly against the oak structure, I reached up and grasped the handle on the flap of the trapdoor, which I'd propped open with a piece of planking on either side.

"I could do it, Richard!" I gasped. "If I push out one of the props and then the other, tugging you as it gives way, you're a dead man! Would be if you weren't already!"

He surged back to life and carefully moved the door out of reach.

"It could be done!" he said with satisfaction. "And if *you* can do it, a five foot, four inch female, anyone can. Let's get out of here, shall we?"

We went out into the sunshine and I flapped a hand at his jacket front, covered in dust and worse. He looked at it with interest.

"Probably splinters of oak-floor boarding in there as well," he said. "Just like the ones we found down the front of Byam's cloak.

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We know he'd arranged a meeting here with someone. Had he lured some female up here with romantic intent? 'Come up and experience the twilight flight with me?'" he purred. He studied his jacket. "Nice roll in the pigeon droppings? Amatory activity witnessed by a million swooping bats? Not the place *I'd* choose for an assignation."

"Wouldn't work for me, either," I agreed. "Have you thought, Richard, someone could have lured *Byam* here? He (could be she) sets up a meeting, gets someone to drop him off here, climbs the tower and kills him, leaves him dangling. He takes the keys from Byam's pocket—or perhaps they'd just been left in the car—and drives it away to the airport. Plenty of public transport back from there to anywhere in the county. With everyone's eyes on Spain, no one's going to look in a deserted church lost among the cornfields. He'd finished the job anyway and, according to his schedule, was supposed to be going on holiday."

"The killer knew that the body would be found sooner or later, but you could reasonably expect a body exposed like that to be judged a nasty accident as—for the moment—it *is,*" said Richard. "And to show your faith in his survival and your innocence, you keep up the payments on his insurance policy and by waiting patiently—you know he'll be discovered in five years at the outside—you come into a tidy sum of money. And five years' rebate, probably. They're in it together! Catherine and Scott."

"Hold on! I'm not so sure," I objected. I was remembering the way Catherine had held her husband's photograph. Protectively. Lovingly. "We're missing something here. Take me back to the office, will you, Richard? There may be something in Byam's work records that throws up some information. Let's find out what else our local Don Giovanni was busy with."

Charles was out on a job when we got back and we settled down with the dusty ledger from five years earlier which recorded the hours spent by each architect on each of his jobs. I pointed out Byam's record. It seemed he had quite a full program. Ongoing repairs at five churches besides the quinquennial on All Souls. He had, typically, spent half a day at each, usually mornings. His afternoons had been spent on domestic projects: He'd been working on extensions to two private houses. In the record, one was named as "Moat Farm Extns." the other "The Limes Extns." Both were common names hereabouts.

"Out-of-county contractors, I see, on both jobs, so no use asking Ben for his insights," said Richard.

I remembered the cutting comment Charles had made about the ladies who ordered extensions and I wondered. I shared my suspicions with Richard.

"Names," he said. "How do we correlate these jobs with names of clients?"

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"We look in the back. That's where Liz wrote down the accounts and payments before it all went on computer."

We tracked down the two extension jobs and looked at the names of the clients.

"But isn't this . . . ?" Richard started to say, recognising one of them. "Oh, good Lord! You don't imagine . . . ? Surely not . . . ?"

I stared at the page for a moment, taking in the meaning of the scene we had uncovered and, in an unthinking gesture of appalled rejection, I slammed the ledger shut.

"We can't leave it there," said Richard. "However much you might want to. But at the moment, all we've got is the suspicion of a scenario that could possibly have led to murder. It's not much. How can we find out more without committing ourselves?"

"I think I know how. Look at the dates. The work was started a year before Byam died. This lady was spinning it out. 'While you're here, Byam, you might as well look at . . .' We get a lot of that. Can you imagine? It would have been under way by Christmas six years ago. I'll get the album."

Every year Charles threw a party in mid December for staff and clients and anyone who'd been involved with the firm in the past year. He enjoyed going around photographing the junketing and faithfully stuck his shots in an album. It was well-thumbed. I leafed back to the Christmas in question. Byam's last. Faces, familiar and unfamiliar, smiled happily or drunkenly at the camera.

"Look at this one, Ellie," Richard murmured. "Says it all, really, don't you think?"

Byam was standing with his arm around a dark and flamboyantly good-looking woman. He was grinning at the photographer and waving a glass around. The woman was paying no attention to the man behind the camera; she only had eyes for Byam. I was a stranger to both of them, but the relationship was clear. It seemed to be clear also to the man standing to the right of the pair, some feet away. He was not smiling. Head lowered, he was showing all the aggression and pent-up anger of a tormented bull. An anger directed straight at the unconcerned Byam.

Richard put a hand down the centre of the photograph, covering up the partying crowd in the background and concealing all but the two main players. The effect was astonishing. Revealed was a crime about to happen. "Murderer and victim, would you say? I think Byam extended himself a little too far on this occasion," said Richard. "Husband sees his wife the victim of a serial cuckolder . . . perhaps she's threatened to leave him and go off with the glamorous architect . . . so what does he do? Makes an appointment with the scallywag in a remote place and engineers his disappearance."

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"It didn't work, you know," I added slowly. "All in vain. The lady left her husband anyway, shortly after. He lives by himself."

"A tragedy for all of them, then. Makes you want to just slam the trapdoor back and cover the whole thing over," said Richard surprisingly.

We sat together in silence, each assessing the evidence, hunting for a flaw, neither of us ready to take the next step. "Oh, who's this?" said Richard, annoyed. "Someone's just drawn up in a van. You've got a visitor."

"It's Ben. You met him yesterday morning. I'm sure he can shed some light on this." I said. "Want me to leave?"

"You just stay put!"

Ben came striding in with his usual sunny confidence and stopped as he took in the books and the album open in front of us. Richard rose to his feet.

"Ah! The Christmas-party book," Ben said, and he sat down in Richard's vacated chair to look at the photographs. "You'll have figured it out, then?" he added prosaically. His calloused forefinger gently traced the face of the dark-haired girl. "You never met her, Ellie. Rachel. She was always too good for me. I knew that." He swallowed and growled, "She deserved better, but not him. No, never *him!* I couldn't stand by and watch her break her heart over that no-good poser. If he'd loved her back, I don't think I'd have bothered."

Richard stood uncertainly by. He seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

"You rang and arranged to meet him at the tower, Ben? Mentioning some problem with the bats?" I suggested. "The contractor," I explained for Richard's benefit. "Just about the only person in the world the architect would have agreed to see at that late hour at the end of a job. You got one of your blokes to drop you off and after you'd . . . afterwards . . . you drove off in Byam's car."

"Story came out that he'd gone off to Spain. Broke my Rachel's heart. She didn't blame me. Why would she?—I never let on. But she pined for him. Never laughed again. Not like that." He looked again with pain at the photograph. "Nothing I could do. Seemed I'd killed her as well, in a way. She packed her bags and went off."

Seeing Richard's shoulders tense, he added wryly, "Oh, nothing sinister! You'll find her at her mother's in Stowmarket. Well, shall we go, then? I always expected it would come out. But I reckoned I had five years. Five years to try to get her back. No chance now."

He turned to me, tears glazing his eyes. "Wouldn't be sorry to hear that damned church had been demolished. Was looking forward to swinging a half-ton ball at it myself! Let me know, Ellie, would you, when you've done the deed?" ●

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The Adventure of

THE MAD TEA-PARTY

by Ellery Queen

Twice filmed for TV, once in 1950 and again in 1975, "The Adventure of the Mad Tea-Party" is one of the finest Ellery Queen short stories. It first saw print in 1934 in *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* (Frederick A. Stokes), but has never before appeared in *EQMM*—surprising, since many of the EQ stories were reprinted in the magazine in its early years. ¶

The tall young man in the dun raincoat thought that he had never seen such a downpour. It gushed out of the black sky in a roaring flood, gray-gleaming in the feeble yellow of the station lamps. The red tails of the local from Jamaica had just been drowned out in the west. It was very dark beyond the ragged blur of light surrounding the little railroad station, and unquestionably very wet. The tall young man shivered under the eaves of the platform roof and wondered what insanity had moved him to venture into the Long Island hinterland in such wretched weather. And where, damn it all, was Owen?

He had just miserably made up his mind to seek out a booth, telephone his regrets, and take the next train back to the City, when a low-slung coupé came splashing and snuffling out of the darkness, squealed to a stop, and a man in chauffeur's livery leaped out and dashed across the gravel for the protection of the eaves.

"Mr. Ellery Queen?" he panted, shaking out his cap. He was a blond young man with a ruddy face and sun-squinted eyes.

"Yes," said Ellery with a sigh. Too late now.

"I'm Millan, Mr. Owen's chauffeur, sir," said the man. "Mr. Owen's sorry he couldn't come down to meet you himself. Some guests— This way, Mr. Queen."

He picked up Ellery's bag and the two of them ran for the coupé. Ellery collapsed against the mohair in an indigo mood. Damn Owen and his invitations! Should have known better. Mere acquaintance, when it came to that. One of J. J.'s questionable friends. People were always pushing so. Put him up on exhibition, like a trained seal. Come, come, Rollo; here's a juicy little fish for

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you! . . . Got vicarious thrills out of listening to crime yarns. Made a man feel like a curiosity. Well, he'd be drawn and quartered if they got him to mention crime once! But then Owen had said Emmy Willowes would be there, and he'd always wanted to meet Emmy. Curious woman, Emmy, from all the reports. Daughter of some blue-blood diplomat who had gone to the dogs—in this case, the stage. Stuffed shirts, her tribe, probably. Atavic! There were some people who still lived in medieval . . . Hmm. Owen wanted him to see "the house." Just taken a month ago. Ducky, he'd said. "Ducky!" The big brute . . .

The coupé splashed along in the darkness, its headlights revealing only remorseless sheets of speckled water and occasionally a tree, a house, a hedge.

Millan cleared his throat. "Rotten weather, isn't it, sir. Worst this spring. The rain, I mean."

Ah, the conversational chauffeur! thought Ellery with an inward groan. "Pity the poor sailor on a night like this," he said piously.

"Ha, ha," said Millan. "Isn't it the truth, though? You're a little late, aren't you, sir? That was the eleven-fifty. Mr. Owen told me this morning you were expected tonight on the nine-twenty."

"Detained," murmured Ellery, wishing he were dead.

"A case, Mr. Queen?" asked Millan eagerly, rolling his squinty eyes.

Even he, O Lord. . . . "No, no. My father had his annual attack of elephantiasis. Poor Dad! We thought for a bad hour there that it was the end."

The chauffeur gaped. Then, looking puzzled, he returned his attention to the soggy pelted road. Ellery closed his eyes with a sigh of relief.

But Millan's was a persevering soul, for after a moment of silence he grinned—true, a trifle dubiously—and said: "Lots of excitement at Mr. Owen's tonight, sir. You see, Master Jonathan—"

"Ah," said Ellery, starting a little. Master Jonathan, eh? Ellery recalled him as a stringy, hot-eyed brat in the indeterminate years between seven and ten who possessed a perfectly fiendish ingenuity for making a nuisance of himself. Master Jonathan. . . . He shivered again, this time from apprehension. He had quite forgotten Master Jonathan.

"Yes, sir, Jonathan's having a birthday party tomorrow, sir—ninth, I think—and Mr. and Mrs. Owen've rigged up something special." Millan grinned again, mysteriously. "Something very special, sir. It's a secret, y'see. The kid—Master Jonathan doesn't know about it yet. Will he be surprised!"

"I doubt it, Millan," groaned Ellery, and lapsed into a dismal silence which not even the chauffeur's companionable blandishments were able to shatter.

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Richard Owen's "ducky" house was a large rambling affair of gables and ells and colored stones and bright shutters, set at the terminal of a winding driveway flanked by soldierly trees. It blazed with light and the front door stood ajar.

"Here we are, Mr. Queen!" cried Millan cheerfully, jumping out and holding the door open. "It's only a hop to the porch; you won't get wet, sir."

Ellery descended and obediently hopped to the porch. Millan fished his bag out of the car and bounded up the steps. "Door open 'n' everything," he grinned. "Guess the help are all watchin' the show."

"Show?" gasped Ellery with a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach.

Millan pushed the door wide open. "Step in, step in, Mr. Queen. I'll go get Mr. Owen. . . . They're rehearsing, y'see. Couldn't do it while Jonathan was up, so they had to wait till he'd gone to bed. It's for tomorrow, y'see. And he was very suspicious; they had an awful time with him—"

"I can well believe that," mumbled Ellery. Damn Jonathan and all his tribe! He stood in a small foyer looking upon a wide brick living room, warm and attractive. "So they're putting on a play. Hmm. . . . Don't bother, Millan; I'll just wander in and wait until they've finished. Who am I to clog the wheels of Drama?"

"Yes, sir," said Millan with a vague disappointment; and he set down the bag and touched his cap and vanished in the darkness outside. The door closed with a click curiously final, shutting out both rain and night.

Ellery reluctantly divested himself of his drenched hat and raincoat, hung them dutifully in the foyer closet, kicked his bag into a corner, and sauntered into the living room to warm his chilled hands at the good fire. He stood before the flames soaking in heat, only half-conscious of the voices which floated through one of the two open doorways beyond the fireplace.

A woman's voice was saying in odd childish tones: "No, please go on. I won't interrupt you again. I dare say there may be *one.*"

"Emmy," thought Ellery, becoming conscious very abruptly. "What's going on here?" He went to the first doorway and leaned against the jamb.

An astonishing sight met him. They were all—as far as he could determine—there. It was apparently a library, a large bookish room done in the modern manner. The farther side had been cleared and a homemade curtain, manufactured out of starchy sheets and a pulley, stretched across the room. The curtain was open, and in the cleared space there was a long table covered with a white cloth and with cups and saucers and things on it. In an armchair at the head of the table sat Emmy Willowes, whimsically girlish in a pinafore, her gold-brown hair streaming down her back, her slim legs sheathed in white stockings, and black pumps

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with low heels on her feet. Beside her sat an apparition, no less: a rabbity creature the size of a man, his huge ears stiffly up, an enormous bow-tie at his furry neck, his mouth clacking open and shut as human sounds came from his throat. Beside the hare there was another apparition: a creature with an amiably rodent little face and slow sleepy movements. And beyond the little one, who looked unaccountably like a dormouse, sat the most remarkable of the quartet—a curious creature with shaggy eyebrows and features reminiscent of George Arliss's, at his throat a dotted bow-tie, dressed Victorianishly in a quaint waistcoat, on his head an extraordinary tall cloth hat in the band of which was stuck a placard reading: "For This Style 10/6."

The audience was composed of two women: an old lady with pure white hair and the stubbornly sweet facial expression which more often than not conceals a chronic acerbity; and a very beautiful young woman with full breasts, red hair, and green eyes. Then Ellery noticed that two domestic heads were stuck in another doorway, gaping and giggling decorously.

The mad tea-party, thought Ellery, grinning. *I might have known, with Emmy in the house. Too good for that merciless brat!*

"They were learning to draw," said the little dormouse in a high-pitched voice, yawning and rubbing its eyes, "and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M—"

"Why with an M?" demanded the woman-child.

"Why not?" snapped the hare, flapping his ears indignantly.

The dormouse began to doze and was instantly beset by the top-hatted gentleman, who pinched him so roundly that he awoke with a shriek and said: "—that begins with an M, such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness—you know you say things are 'much of a muchness'—did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness?"

"Really, now you ask me," said the girl, quite confused, "I don't think—"

"Then you shouldn't talk," said the Hatter tartly.

The girl rose in open disgust and began to walk away, her white legs twinkling. The dormouse fell asleep and the hare and the Hatter stood up and grasped the dormouse's little head and tried very earnestly to push it into the mouth of a monstrous teapot on the table.

And the little girl cried, stamping her right foot: "At any rate I'll never go *there* again. It's the stupidest tea-party I was ever at in all my life!"

And she vanished behind the curtain; an instant later it swayed and came together as she operated the rope of the pulley.

"Superb," drawled Ellery, clapping his hands. "*Brava,* Alice. And a couple of *bravi* for the zoological characters, Messrs. Dormouse and March Hare, not to speak of my good friend the Mad Hatter."

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The Mad Hatter goggled at him, tore off his hat, and came running across the room. His vulturine features under the makeup were both good-humored and crafty; he was a stoutish man in his prime, a faintly cynical and ruthless prime. "Queen! When on earth did you come? Darned if I hadn't completely forgotten about you. What held you up?"

"Family matter. Millan did the honors. Owen, that's your natural costume, I'll swear. I don't know what ever possessed you to go into Wall Street. You were born to be the Hatter."

"Think so?" chuckled Owen, pleased. "I guess I always did have a yen for the stage; that's why I backed Emmy Willowes's *Alice* show. Here, I want you to meet the gang. Mother," he said to the white-haired old lady, "may I present Mr. Ellery Queen. Laura's mother, Queen—Mrs. Mansfield." The old lady smiled a sweet, sweet smile; but Ellery noticed that her eyes were very sharp. "Mrs. Gardner," continued Owen, indicating the buxom young woman with the red hair and green eyes. "Believe it or not, she's the wife of that hairy Hare over there. Ho, ho, ho!"

There was something a little brutal in Owen's laughter. Ellery bowed to the beautiful woman and said quickly: "Gardner? You're not the wife of Paul Gardner, the architect?"

"Guilty," said the March Hare in a cavernous voice; and he removed his head and disclosed a lean face with twinkling eyes. "How are you, Mr. Queen? I haven't seen you since I testified for your father in that Schultz murder case in the Village."

They shook hands. "Surprise," said Ellery. "This is nice. Mrs. Gardner, you have a clever husband. He set the defense by their respective ears with his expert testimony in that case."

"Oh, I've always said Paul is a genius," smiled the red-haired woman. She had a queer husky voice. "But he won't believe me. He thinks I'm the only one in the world who doesn't appreciate him."

"Now, Carolyn," protested Gardner with a laugh; but the twinkle had gone out of his eyes and for some odd reason he glanced at Richard Owen.

"Of course you remember Laura," boomed Owen, taking Ellery forcibly by the arm. "That's the Dormouse. Charming little rat, isn't she?"

Mrs. Mansfield lost her sweet expression for a fleeting instant; very fleeting indeed. What the Dormouse thought about being publicly characterized as a rodent, however charming, by her husband was concealed by the furry little head; when she took it off she was smiling. She was a wan little woman with tired eyes and cheeks that had already begun to sag.

"And this," continued Owen with the pride of a stock raiser exhibiting a prize milch cow, "is the one and only Emmy. Emmy, meet Mr. Queen, that murder-smelling chap I've been telling you

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about. Miss Willowes."

"You see us, Mr. Queen," murmured the actress, "in character. I hope you aren't here on a professional visit? Because if you are, we'll get into mufti at once and let you go to work. I know *I've* a vicariously guilty conscience. If I were to be convicted of every mental murder I've committed, I'd need the nine lives of the Cheshire Cat. Those damn critics—"

"The costume," said Ellery, not looking at her legs, "is most fetching. And I think I like you better as Alice." She made a charming Alice; she was curved in her slimness, half-boy, half-girl. "Whose idea was this, anyway?"

"I suppose you think we're fools or nuts," chuckled Owen. "Here, sit down, Queen. Maud!" he roared. "A cocktail for Mr. Queen. Bring some more fixin's." A frightened domestic head vanished. "We're having a dress rehearsal for Johnny's birthday party tomorrow; we've invited all the kids of the neighborhood. Emmy's brilliant idea; she brought the costumes down from the theater. You know we closed Saturday night."

"I hadn't heard. I thought *Alice* was playing to S.R.O."

"So it was. But our lease at the Odeon ran out and we've our engagements on the road to keep. We open in Boston next Wednesday."

Slim-legged Maud set a pinkish liquid concoction before Ellery. He sipped slowly, succeeding in not making a face.

"Sorry to have to break this up," said Paul Gardner, beginning to take off his costume. "But Carolyn and I have a bad trip before us. And then tomorrow . . . The road must be an absolute washout."

"Pretty bad," said Ellery politely, setting down his three-quarters'-full glass.

"I won't hear of it," said Laura Owen. Her pudgy little Dormouse's stomach gave her a peculiar appearance, tiny and fat and sexless. "Driving home in this storm! Carolyn, you and Paul must stay over."

"It's only four miles, Laura," murmured Mrs. Gardner.

"Nonsense, Carolyn! More like forty on a night like this," boomed Owen. His cheeks were curiously pale and damp under the makeup. "That's settled! We've got more room than we know what to do with. Paul saw to that when he designed this development."

"That's the insidious part of knowing architects socially," said Emmy Willowes with a grimace. She flung herself in a chair and tucked her long legs under her. "You can't fool 'em about the number of available guest rooms."

"Don't mind Emmy," grinned Owen. "She's the Peck's Bad Girl of show business: no manners at all. Well, well! This is great. How's about a drink, Paul?"

"No, thanks."

"You'll have one, won't you, Carolyn? Only good sport in the

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crowd." Ellery realized with a furious embarrassment that his host was, under the red jovial glaze of the exterior, vilely drunk.

She raised her heavily-lidded green eyes to his. "I'd love it, Dick." They stared with peculiar hunger at each other. Mrs. Owen suddenly smiled and turned her back, struggling with her cumbersome costume.

And, just as suddenly, Mrs. Mansfield rose and smiled her unconvincing sweet smile and said in her sugary voice to no one in particular: "*Will* you all excuse me? It's been a trying day, and I'm an old woman. . . . Laura, my darling." She went to her daughter and kissed the lined, averted forehead.

Everybody murmured something; including Ellery, who had a headache, a slow pinkish fire in his vitals, and a consuming wishfulness to be far, far away.

Mr. Ellery Queen came to with a start and a groan. He turned over in bed, feeling very poorly. He had dozed in fits since one o'clock, annoyed rather than soothed by the splash of the rain against the bedroom windows. And now he was miserably awake, inexplicably sleepless, attacked by a rather surprising insomnia. He sat up and reached for his wrist watch, which was ticking thunderously away on the night table beside his bed. By the radium hands he saw that it was five past two.

He lay back, crossing his palms behind his head, and stared into the half-darkness. The mattress was deep and downy, as one had a right to expect of the mattress of a plutocrat, but it did not rest his tired bones. The house was cozy, but it did not comfort him. His hostess was thoughtful, but uncomfortably woebegone. His host was a disturbing force, like the storm. His fellow guests; Master Jonathan snuffling away in his junior bed—Ellery was positive that Master Jonathan snuffled. . . .

At two-fifteen he gave up the battle and, rising, turned on the light and got into his dressing gown and slippers. That there was no book or magazine on or in the night table he had ascertained before retiring. Shocking hospitality! Sighing, he went to the door and opened it and peered out. A small night-light glimmered at the landing down the hall. Everything was quiet.

And suddenly he was attacked by the strangest diffidence. He definitely did not want to leave the bedroom.

Analyzing the fugitive fear, and arriving nowhere, Ellery sternly reproached himself for an imaginative fool and stepped out into the hall. He was not habitually a creature of nerves, nor was he psychic; he laid the blame to lowered physical resistance due to fatigue, lack of sleep. This was a nice house with nice people in it. It was like a man, he thought, saying: "Nice doggie, nice doggie," to a particularly fearsome beast with slavering jaws. That woman

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with the sea-green eyes. Put to sea in a sea-green boat. Or was it pea-green. . . . "No room! No room!" . . . "There's *plenty* of room," said Alice indignantly. . . . And Mrs. Mansfield's smile did make you shiver.

Berating himself bitterly for the ferment his imagination was in, he went down the carpeted stairs to the living room.

It was pitch-dark and he did not know where the light switch was. He stumbled over a hassock and stubbed his toe and cursed silently. The library should be across from the stairs, next to the fireplace. He strained his eyes toward the fireplace, but the last embers had died. Stepping warily, he finally reached the fireplace-wall. He groped about in the rain-splattered silence, searching for the library door. His hand met a cold knob, and he turned the knob rather noisily and swung the door open. His eyes were oriented to the darkness now and he had already begun to make out in the mistiest black haze the unrecognizable outlines of still objects.

The darkness from beyond the door, however, struck him like a blow. It was darker darkness. . . . He was about to step across the sill when he stopped. It was the wrong room. Not the library at all. How he knew he could not say, but he was sure he had pushed open the door of the wrong room. Must have wandered orbitally to the right. Lost men in the dark forest . . . He stared intently straight before him into the absolute, unrelieved blackness, sighed, and retreated. The door shut noisily again.

He groped along the wall to the left. A few feet. . . . There it was! The very next door. He paused to test his psychic faculties. No, all's well. Grinning, he pushed open the door, entered boldly, fumbled on the nearest wall for the switch, found it, pressed. The light flooded on to reveal, triumphantly, the library.

The curtain was closed, the room in disorder as he had last seen it before being conducted upstairs by his host.

He went to the built-in bookcases, scanned several shelves, hesitated between two volumes, finally selected *Huckleberry Finn* as good reading on a dour night, put out the light, and felt his way back across the living room to the stairway. Book tucked under his arm, he began to climb the stairs. There was a footfall from the landing above. He looked up. A man's dark form was silhouetted below the tiny landing light.

"Owen?" whispered a dubious male voice.

Ellery laughed. "It's Queen, Gardner. Can't you sleep, either?"

He heard the man sigh with relief. "Lord, no! I was just coming downstairs for something to read. Carolyn—my wife's asleep, I guess, in the room adjoining mine. How she can sleep—! There's something in the air tonight."

"Or else you drank too much," said Ellery cheerfully, mounting the stairs.

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Gardner was in pajamas and dressing-gown, his hair mussed. "Didn't drink at all to speak of. Must be this confounded rain. My nerves are all shot."

"Something in that. Hardy believed, anyway, in the Greek unities. . . . If you can't sleep, you might join me for a smoke in my room, Gardner."

"You're sure I won't be—"

"Keeping me up? Nonsense. The only reason I fished about downstairs for a book was to occupy my mind with something. Talk's infinitely better than Huck Finn, though he does help at times. Come on."

They went to Ellery's room and Ellery produced cigarettes and they relaxed in chairs and chatted and smoked until the early dawn began struggling to emerge from behind the fine gray wet bars of the rain outside. Then Gardner went yawning back to his room and Ellery fell into a heavy, uneasy slumber.

He was on the rack in a tall room of the Inquisition and his left arm was being torn out of his shoulder socket. The pain was almost pleasant. Then he awoke to find Millan's ruddy face in broad daylight above him, his blond hair tragically disheveled. He was jerking at Ellery's arm for all he was worth.

"Mr. Queen!" he was crying. "Mr. Queen! For God's sake, wake up!"

Ellery sat up quickly, startled. "What's the matter, Millan?"

"Mr. Owen, sir. He's—He's gone!"

Ellery sprang out of bed. "What d'ye mean, man?"

"Disappeared, Mr. Queen. We—We can't find him. Just gone. Mrs. Owen is all—"

"You go downstairs, Millan," said Ellery calmly, stripping off his pajama-coat, "and pour yourself a drink. Please tell Mrs. Owen not to do anything until I come down. And nobody's to leave or telephone. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Millan in a low voice, and blundered off.

Ellery dressed like a fireman, splashed his face, spat water, adjusted his necktie, and ran downstairs. He found Laura Owen in a crumpled negligee on the sofa, sobbing. Mrs. Mansfield was patting her daughter's shoulder. Master Jonathan Owen was scowling at his grandmother, Emmy Willowes silently smoked a cigarette, and the Gardners were pale and quiet by the gray-washed windows.

"Mr. Queen," said the actress quickly. "It's a drama, hot off the script. At least Laura Owen thinks so. Won't you assure her that it's all probably nothing?"

"I can't do that," smiled Ellery, "until I learn the facts. Owen's gone? How? When?"

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"Oh, Mr. Queen," choked Mrs. Owen, raising a tear-stained face. "I know something—something dreadful's happened. I had a feeling—You remember last night, after Richard showed you to your room?"

"Yes."

"Then he came back downstairs and said he had some work to do in his den for Monday, and told me to go to bed. Everybody else had gone upstairs. The servants, too. I warned him not to stay up too late and I went up to bed. I—I was exhausted, and I fell right asleep—"

"You occupy one bedroom, Mrs. Owen?"

"Yes. Twin beds. I fell asleep and didn't wake up until a half-hour ago. Then I saw—" She shuddered and began to sob again. Her mother looked helpless and angry. "His bed hadn't been slept in. His clothes—the ones he'd taken off when he got into the costume—were still where he had left them on the chair by his bed. I was shocked, and ran downstairs; but he was gone. . . ."

"Ah," said Ellery queerly. "Then, as far as you know, he's still in that Mad Hatter's rig? Have you looked over his wardrobe? Are any of his regular clothes missing?"

"No, no; they're all there. Oh, he's dead. I know he's dead."

"Laura, dear, please," said Mrs. Mansfield in a tight, quavery voice.

"Oh, Mother, it's too horrible—"

"Here, here," said Ellery. "No hysterics. Was he worried about anything? Business, for instance?"

"No, I'm sure he wasn't. In fact, he said only yesterday things were picking up beautifully. And he isn't—isn't the type to worry, anyway."

"Then it probably isn't amnesia. He hasn't had a shock of some sort recently?"

"No, no."

"No possibility, despite the costume, that he went to his office?"

"No. He never goes down Saturdays."

Master Jonathan jammed his fists into the pockets of his Eton jacket and said bitterly: "I bet he's drunk again. Makin' Mamma cry. I hope he *never* comes back."

"Jonathan!" screamed Mrs. Mansfield. "You go up to your room this very minute, do you hear, you nasty boy? This minute!"

No one said anything; Mrs. Owen continued to sob; so Master Jonathan thrust out his lower lip, scowled at his grandmother with unashamed dislike, and stamped upstairs.

"Where," said Ellery with a frown, "was your husband when you last saw him, Mrs. Owen? In this room?"

"In his den," she said with difficulty. "He went in just as I went upstairs. I saw him go in. That door, there." She pointed to the

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door at the right of the library door. Ellery started; it was the door to the room he had almost blundered into during the night in his hunt for the library.

"Do you think—" began Carolyn Gardner in her husky voice, and stopped. Her lips were dry, and in the gray morning light her hair did not seem so red and her eyes did not seem so green. There was, in fact, a washed-out look about her, as if all the fierce vitality within her had been quenched by what had happened.

"Keep out of this, Carolyn," said Paul Gardner harshly. His eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep.

"Come, come," murmured Ellery, "we may be, as Miss Willowes has said, making a fuss over nothing at all. If you'll excuse me . . . I'll have a peep at the den."

He went into the den, closing the door behind him, and stood with his back squarely against the door. It was a small room, so narrow that it looked long by contrast; it was sparsely furnished and seemed a businesslike place. There was a simple neatness about its desk, a modern severity about its furnishings that were reflections of the direct, brutal character of Richard Owen. The room was as trim as a pin; it was almost ludicrous to conceive of its having served as the scene of a crime.

Ellery gazed long and thoughtfully. Nothing out of place, so far as he could see; and nothing, at least perceptible to a stranger, added. Then his eyes wavered and fixed themselves upon what stood straight before him. That was odd. . . . Facing him as he leaned against the door there was a bold naked mirror set flush into the opposite wall and reaching from floor to ceiling—a startling feature of the room's decorations. Ellery's lean figure, and the door behind him, were perfectly reflected in the sparkling glass. And there, above . . . In the mirror he saw, above the reflection of the door against which he was leaning, the reflection of the face of a modern electric clock. In the dingy grayness of the light there was a curious lambent quality about its dial. . . . He pushed away from the door and turned and stared up. It was a chromium-and-onyx clock, about a foot in diameter, round and simple and startling.

He opened the door and beckoned Millan, who had joined the silent group in the living room. "Have you a stepladder?"

Millan brought one. Ellery smiled, shut the door firmly, mounted the ladder, and examined the clock. Its electric outlet was behind, concealed from view. The plug was in the socket, as he saw at once. The clock was going; the time—he consulted his wrist watch—was reasonably accurate. But then he cupped his hands as best he could to shut out what light there was and stared hard and saw that the numerals and the hands, as he had suspected, were radium-painted. They glowed faintly.

He descended, opened the door, gave the ladder into Millan's

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keeping, and sauntered into the living room. They looked up at him trustfully.

"Well," said Emmy Willowes with a light shrug, "has the Master Mind discovered the all-important clue? Don't tell us that Dickie Owen is out playing golf at the Meadowbrook links in that Mad Hatter's getup!"

"Well, Mr. Queen?" asked Mrs. Owen anxiously.

Ellery sank into an armchair and lighted a cigarette. "There's something curious in there. Mrs. Owen, did you get this house furnished?"

She was puzzled. "Furnished? Oh no. We bought it, you know; brought all our own things."

"Then the electric clock above the door in the den is yours?"

"The clock?" They all stared at him. "Why, of course. What has that—"

"Hmm," said Ellery. "That clock has a disappearing quality, like the Cheshire Cat—since we may as well continue being Carrollish, Miss Willowes."

"But what can the clock possibly have to do with Richard's—being gone?" asked Mrs. Mansfield with asperity.

Ellery shrugged. "*Je n'sais.* The point is that a little after two this morning, being unable to sleep, I ambled downstairs to look for a book. In the dark I blundered to the door of the den, mistaking it for the library door. I opened it and looked in. But I saw nothing, you see."

"But how could you, Mr. Queen?" said Mrs. Gardner in a small voice; her breasts heaved. "If it was dark—"

"That's the curious part of it," drawled Ellery. "I *should* have seen something *because* it was so dark, Mrs. Gardner."

"But—"

"The clock over the door."

"Did you go in?" murmured Emmy Willowes, frowning. "I can't say I understand. The clock's above the door, isn't it?"

"There is a mirror facing the door," explained Ellery absently, "and the fact that it was so dark makes my seeing nothing quite remarkable. Because that clock has luminous hands and numerals. Consequently, I should have seen their reflected glow very clearly indeed in that pitch-darkness. But I didn't, you see. I saw literally nothing at all."

They were silent, bewildered. Then Gardner muttered: "I still don't see— You mean something, somebody was standing in front of the mirror, obscuring the reflection of the clock?"

"Oh, no. The clock's above the door—a good seven feet or more from the floor. The mirror reaches to the ceiling. There isn't a piece of furniture in that room seven feet high, and certainly we may dismiss the possibility of an intruder seven feet or more tall. No,

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no, Gardner. It does seem as if the clock wasn't above the door at all when I looked in."

"Are you sure, young man," snapped Mrs. Mansfield, "that you know what you're talking about? I thought we were concerned with my son-in-law's absence. And how on earth could the clock not have been there?"

Ellery closed his eyes. "Fundamental. *It was moved from its position.* Wasn't above the door when I looked in. After I left, it was returned."

"But why on earth," murmured the actress, "should anyone want to move a mere clock from a wall, Mr. Queen? That's almost as nonsensical as some of the things in *Alice.*"

"That," said Ellery, "is the question I'm propounding to myself. Frankly I don't know." Then he opened his eyes. "By the way, has anyone seen the Mad Hatter's hat?"

Mrs. Owen shivered. "No, that—that's gone, too."

"You've looked for it?"

"Yes. Would you like to look yours—"

"No, no, I'll take your word for it, Mrs. Owen. Oh, yes. Your husband has no enemies?" He smiled. "That's the routine question, Miss Willowes. I'm afraid I can't offer you anything startling in the way of technique."

"Enemies? Oh, I'm sure not," quavered Mrs. Owen. "Richard was—is strong and—and sometimes rather curt and contemptuous, but I'm sure no one would hate him enough to—to kill him." She shivered again and drew the silk of her negligee closer about her plump shoulders.

"Don't say that, Laura," said Mrs. Mansfield sharply. "I do declare, you people are like children! It probably has the simplest explanation."

"Quite possible," said Ellery in a cheerful voice. "It's the depressing weather, I suppose. . . . There! I believe the rain's stopped." They dully looked out the windows. The rain had perversely ceased, and the sky was growing brighter. "Of course," continued Ellery, "there are certain possibilities. It's conceivable—I say conceivable, Mrs. Owen—that your husband has been . . . well, kidnapped. Now, now, don't look so frightened. It's a theory only. The fact that he has disappeared in the costume does seem to point to a very abrupt—and therefore possibly enforced—departure. You haven't found a note of some kind? Nothing in your letter-box? The morning mail—"

"Kidnapped," whispered Mrs. Owen feebly.

"Kidnapped?" breathed Mrs. Gardner, and bit her lip. But there was a brightness in her eye, like the brightness of the sky outdoors.

"No note, no mail," snapped Mrs. Mansfield. "Personally, I think this is ridiculous. Laura, this is your house, but I think I have a duty. . . . You should do one of two things. Either take this seri-

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ously and telephone the *regular* police, or forget all about it. *I'm* inclined to believe Richard got befuddled—he *had* a lot to drink last night, dear—and wandered off drunk somewhere. He's probably sleeping it off in a field somewhere and won't come back with anything worse than a bad cold."

"Excellent suggestion," drawled Ellery. "All except for the summoning of the *regular* police, Mrs. Mansfield. I assure you I possess—er—*ex officio* qualifications. Let's not call the police and say we did. If there's any explaining to do—afterward—I'll do it. Meanwhile, I suggest we try to forget all this unpleasantness and wait. If Mr. Owen hasn't returned by nightfall, we can go into conference and decide what measures to take. Agreed?"

"Sounds reasonable," said Gardner disconsolately. "May I—" he smiled and shrugged—"this *is* exciting!—telephone my office, Queen?"

"Lord, yes."

Mrs. Owen shrieked suddenly, rising and tottering toward the stairs. "Jonathan's birthday party! I forgot all about it! And all those children invited—What *will* I say?"

"I suggest," said Ellery in a sad voice, "that Master Jonathan is indisposed, Mrs. Owen. Harsh, but necessary. You might phone all the potential spectators of the mad tea-party and voice your regrets." And Ellery rose and wandered into the library.

It was a depressing day for all the lightening skies and the crisp sun. The morning wore on and nothing whatever happened. Mrs. Mansfield firmly tucked her daughter into bed, made her swallow a small dose of Luminal from a big bottle in the medicine chest, and remained with her until she dropped off to exhausted sleep. Then the old lady telephoned to all and sundry the collective Owen regrets over the unfortunate turn of events. Jonathan *would* have to run a fever when . . . Master Jonathan, apprised later by his grandmother of the debacle, sent up an ululating howl of surprisingly healthy anguish that caused Ellery, poking about downstairs in the library, to feel prickles slither up and down his spine. It took the combined labors of Mrs. Mansfield, Millan, the maid, and the cook to pacify the Owen hope. A five-dollar bill ultimately restored a rather strained entente. . . . Emmy Willowes spent the day serenely in reading. The Gardners listlessly played two-handed bridge.

Luncheon was a dismal affair. No one spoke in more than monosyllables, and the strained atmosphere grew positively taut.

During the afternoon they wandered about, restless ghosts. Even the actress began to show signs of tension: She consumed innumerable cigarettes and cocktails and lapsed into almost sullen silence. No word came; the telephone rang only once, and then it was merely the local confectioner protesting the cancellation of the

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ice-cream order. Ellery spent most of the afternoon in mysterious activity in the library and den. What he was looking for remained his secret. At five o'clock he emerged from the den, rather gray of face. There was a deep crease between his brows. He went out onto the porch and leaned against a pillar, sunk in thought. The gravel was dry; the sun had quickly sopped up the rain. When he went back into the house it was already dusk and growing darker each moment with the swiftness of the country nightfall.

There was no one about; the house was quiet, its miserable occupants having retired to their rooms. Ellery sought a chair. He buried his face in his hands and thought for long minutes, completely still.

And then at last something happened to his face and he went to the foot of the stairs and listened. No sound. He tiptoed back, reached for the telephone, and spent the next fifteen minutes in low-voiced, earnest conversation with someone in New York. When he had finished, he went upstairs to his room.

An hour later, while the others were downstairs gathering for dinner, he slipped down the rear stairway and out of the house unobserved even by the cook in the kitchen. He spent some time in the thick darkness of the grounds.

How it happened Ellery never knew. He felt its effects soon after dinner; and on retrospection he recalled that the others, too, had seemed drowsy at approximately the same time. It was a late dinner and a cold one. Owen's disappearance apparently having disrupted the culinary organization as well; so that it was not until a little after eight that the coffee—Ellery was certain later it had been the coffee—was served by the trim-legged maid. The drowsiness came on less than half an hour later. They were seated in the living room, chatting dully about nothing at all. Mrs. Owen, pale and silent, had gulped her coffee thirstily; had called for a second cup, in fact. Only Mrs. Mansfield had been belligerent. She had been definitely of a mind, it appeared, to telephone the police. She had great faith in the local constabulary of Long Island, particularly in one Chief Naughton, the local prefect; and she left no doubt in Ellery's mind of *his* incompetency. Gardner had been restless and a little rebellious; he had tinkered with the piano in the alcove. Emmy Willowes had drawn herself into a slant-eyed shell, no longer amused and very, very quiet. Mrs. Gardner had been nervous. Jonathan, packed off screaming to bed. . . .

It came over their senses like a soft insidious blanket of snow. Just a pleasant sleepiness. The room was warm, too, and Ellery rather hazily felt beads of perspiration on his forehead. He was half-gone before his dulled brain sounded a warning note. And then, trying in panic to rise, to use his muscles, he felt himself slipping, slipping into unconsciousness, his body as leaden and

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remote as Vega. His last conscious thought, as the room whirled dizzily before his eyes and he saw blearily the expressions of his companions, was that they had all been drugged. . . .

The dizziness seemed merely to have taken up where it had left off, almost without hiatus. Specks danced before his closed eyes and somebody was hammering petulantly at his temples. Then he opened his eyes and saw glittering sun fixed upon the floor at his feet. Good God, all night. . . .

He sat up groaning and feeling his head. The others were sprawled in various attitudes of labored-breathing coma about him—without exception. Someone—his aching brain took it in dully; it was Emmy Willowes—stirred and sighed. He got to his feet and stumbled toward a portable bar and poured himself a stiff, nasty drink of scotch. Then, with his throat burning, he felt unaccountably better; and he went to the actress and pummeled her gently until she opened her eyes and gave him a sick, dazed, troubled look.

"What—when—"

"Drugged," croaked Ellery. "The crew of us. Try to revive these people, Miss Willowes, while I scout about a bit. And see if anyone's shamming."

He wove his way a little uncertainly, but with purpose, toward the rear of the house. Groping, he found the kitchen. And there were the trim-legged maid and Millan and the cook unconscious in chairs about the kitchen table over cold cups of coffee. He made his way back to the living room, nodded at Miss Willowes working over Gardner at the piano, and staggered upstairs. He discovered Master Jonathan's bedroom after a short search; the boy was still sleeping—a deep natural sleep punctuated by nasal snuffles. Lord, he *did* snuffle! Groaning, Ellery visited the lavatory adjoining the master bedroom. After a little while he went downstairs and into the den. He came out almost at once, haggard and wild-eyed. He took his hat from the foyer closet and hurried outdoors into the warm sunshine. He spent fifteen minutes poking about the grounds; the Owen house was shallowly surrounded by timber and seemed isolated as a Western ranch. . . . When he returned to the house, looking grim and disappointed, the others were all conscious, making mewing little sounds and holding their heads like scared children.

"Queen, for God's sake," began Gardner hoarsely.

"Whoever it was used that Luminal in the lavatory upstairs," said Ellery, flinging his hat away and wincing at a sudden pain in his head. "The stuff Mrs. Mansfield gave Mrs. Owen yesterday to make her sleep. Except that almost the whole of that large bottle was used. Swell sleeping draught! Make yourselves comfortable while I conduct a little investigation in the kitchen. I think it was the java." But when he returned he was grimacing. "No luck. *Madame la Cuisinière,* it seems, had to visit the bathroom at one

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period; Millan was out in the garage looking at the cars; and the maid was off somewhere, doubtless primping. Result: Our friend the Luminalist had an opportunity to pour most of the powder from the bottle into the coffeepot. Damn!"

"I *am* going to call the police!" cried Mrs. Mansfield hysterically, striving to rise. "We'll be murdered in our beds, next thing we know! Laura, I positively insist—"

"Please, please, Mrs. Mansfield," said Ellery wearily. "No heroics. And you would be of greater service if you went into the kitchen and checked the insurrection that's brewing there. The two females are on the verge of packing, I'll swear."

Mrs. Mansfield bit her lip and flounced off. They heard her no longer sweet voice raised in remonstrance a moment later.

"But, Queen," protested Gardner, "we can't go unprotected—"

"What I want to know in my infantile way," drawled Emmy Willowes from pale lips, "is who did it, and why. That bottle upstairs . . . It looks unconscionably like one of us, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Gardner gave a little shriek. Mrs. Owen sank back into her chair.

"One of us?" whispered the red-haired woman.

Ellery smiled without humor. Then his smile faded and he cocked his head toward the foyer. "What was that?" he snapped suddenly.

They turned, terror-stricken, and looked. But there was nothing to see. Ellery strode toward the front door.

"What is it now, for heaven's sake?" faltered Mrs. Owen.

"I thought I heard a sound—" He flung the door open. The early morning sun streamed in. Then they saw him stoop and pick up something from the porch and rise and look swiftly about outside. But he shook his head and stepped back, closing the door.

"Package," he said with a frown. "I *thought* someone . . ."

They looked blankly at the brown-paper bundle in his hands. "Package?" asked Mrs. Owen. Her face lit up. "Oh, it may be from Richard!" And then the light went out, to be replaced by fearful pallor. "Oh, do you think—?"

"It's addressed," said Ellery slowly, "to you, Mrs. Owen. No stamp, no postmark, written in pencil in disguised block letters. I think I'll take the liberty of opening this, Mrs. Owen." He broke the feeble twine and tore away the wrapping of the crude parcel. And then he frowned even more deeply. For the package contained only a pair of large men's shoes, worn at the heels and soles—sport oxfords in tan and white.

Mrs. Owen rolled her eyes, her nostrils quivering with nausea. "Richard's!" she gasped. And she sank back, half-fainting.

"Indeed?" murmured Ellery. "How interesting. Not, of course, the shoes he wore Friday night. You're positive they're his, Mrs. Owen?"

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"Oh, he *has* been kidnapped!" quavered Mrs. Mansfield from the rear doorway. "Isn't there a note, b-blood . . ."

"Nothing but the shoes. I doubt the kidnap theory now, Mrs. Mansfield. These weren't the shoes Owen wore Friday night. When did you see these last, Mrs. Owen?"

She moaned: "In his wardrobe closet upstairs only yesterday afternoon. Oh—"

"There. You see?" said Ellery cheerfully. "Probably stolen from the closet while we were all unconscious last night. And now returned rather spectacularly. So far, you know, there's been no harm done. I'm afraid," he said with severity, "we're nursing a viper at our bosoms."

But they did not laugh. Miss Willowes said strangely: "Very odd. In fact, insane, Mr. Queen. I can't see the slightest purpose in it."

"Nor I, at the moment. Somebody's either playing a monstrous prank, or there's a devilishly clever and warped mentality behind all this. He retrieved his hat and made for the door.

"Wherever are you going?" gasped Mrs. Gardner.

"Oh, out for a thinking spell under God's blue canopy. But remember," he added quietly, "that's a privilege reserved to detectives. No one is to set foot outside this house."

He returned an hour later without explanation.

At noon they found the second package. It was a squarish parcel wrapped in the same brown paper. Inside there was a cardboard carton, and in the carton, packed in crumpled tissue paper, there were two magnificent toy sailing-boats such as children race on summer lakes. The package was addressed to Miss Willowes.

"This is getting dreadful," murmured Mrs. Gardner, her full lips trembling. "I'm all goose pimples."

"I'd feel better," murmured Miss Willowes, "if it was a bloody dagger, or something. Toy boats!" She stepped back and her eyes narrowed. "Now, look here, good people, I'm as much a sport as anybody, but a joke's a joke and I'm just a bit fed up on this particular one. Who's manoeuvring these monkeyshines?"

"Joke," snarled Gardner. He was white as death. "It's the work of a madman, I tell you!"

"Now, now," murmured Ellery, staring at the green-and-cream boats. "We shan't get anywhere this way. Mrs. Owen, have you ever seen these before?"

Mrs. Owen, on the verge of collapse, mumbled: "Oh, my good dear God. Mr. Queen, I don't— Why, they're—they're Jonathan's!"

Ellery blinked. Then he went to the foot of the stairway and yelled: "Johnny! Come down here a minute."

Master Jonathan descended sluggishly, sulkily. "What do you want?" he asked in a cold voice.

"Come here, son." Master Jonathan came with dragging feet.

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"When did you see these boats of yours last?"

"Boats!" shrieked Master Jonathan, springing into life. He pounced on them and snatched them away, glaring at Ellery. "My boats! Never seen such a place. My boats! You stole 'em!"

"Come, come," said Ellery, flushing, "be a good little man. When did you see them last?"

"Yest'day! In my toy chest! My boats! Scan'lous," hissed Master Jonathan, and fled upstairs, hugging his boats to his scrawny breast.

"Stolen at the same time," said Ellery helplessly. "By thunder, Miss Willowes, I'm almost inclined to agree with you. By the way, who bought those boats for your son, Mrs. Owen?"

"H-his father."

"Damn," said Ellery for the second time that impious Sunday, and he sent them all on a search of the house to ascertain if anything else was missing. But no one could find that anything had been taken.

It was when they came down from upstairs that they found Ellery regarding a small white envelope with puzzlement.

"Now what?" demanded Gardner wildly.

"Stuck in the door," he said thoughtfully. "Hadn't noticed it before. This *is* a queer one."

It was a rich piece of stationery, sealed with blue wax on the back and bearing the same penciled scrawl, this time addressed to Mrs. Mansfield.

The old lady collapsed in the nearest chair, holding her hand to her heart. She was speechless with fear.

"Well," said Mrs. Gardner huskily, "open it."

Ellery tore open the envelope. His frown deepened. "Why," he muttered, "there's nothing at all inside!"

Gardner gnawed his fingers and turned away, mumbling. Mrs. Gardner shook her head like a dazed pugilist and stumbled toward the bar for the fifth time that day. Emmy Willowes's brow was dark as thunder.

"You know," said Mrs. Owen almost quietly, "that's Mother's stationery." And there was another silence.

Ellery muttered: "Queerer and queerer. I *must* get this organized. . . . The shoes are a puzzler. The toy boats might be construed as a gift; yesterday was Jonathan's birthday; the boats are his—a distorted practical joke. . . ." He shook his head. "Doesn't wash. And this third—an envelope without a letter in it. That would seem to point to the envelope as the important thing. But the envelope's the property of Mrs. Mansfield. The only other thing—ah, the wax!" He scanned the blue blob on the back narrowly, but it bore no seal-insignia of any kind.

"That," said Mrs. Owen again in the quiet unnatural voice,

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"looks like our wax, too, Mr. Queen, from the library."

Ellery dashed away, followed by a troubled company. Mrs. Owen went to the library desk and opened the top drawer.

"Was it here?" asked Ellery quickly.

"Yes," she said, and then her voice quivered. "I used it only Friday when I wrote a letter. Oh, good . . ."

There was no stick of wax in the drawer.

And while they stared at the drawer, the front doorbell rang.

It was a market basket this time, lying innocently on the porch. In it, nestling crisp and green, were two large cabbages.

Ellery shouted for Gardner and Millan, himself led the charge down the steps. They scattered, searching wildly through the brush and woods surrounding the house. But they found nothing. No sign of the bell-ringer, no sign of the ghost who had cheerfully left a basket of cabbages at the door as his fourth odd gift. It was as if he were made of smoke and materialized only for the instant he needed to press his impalpable finger to the bell.

They found the women huddled in a corner of the living room, shivering and white-lipped. Mrs. Mansfield, shaking like an aspen, was at the telephone ringing for the local police. Ellery started to protest, shrugged, set his lips, and stooped over the basket.

There was a slip of paper tied by string to the handle of the basket. The same crude pencil-scrawl. . . . "Mr. Paul Gardner."

"Looks," muttered Ellery, "as if you're elected, old fellow, this time."

Gardner stared as if he could not believe his eyes. "Cabbages!"

"Excuse me," said Ellery curtly. He went away. When he returned he was shrugging. "From the vegetable bin in the outside pantry, says Cook. She hadn't thought to look for missing *vegetables,* she told me with scorn."

Mrs. Mansfield was babbling excitedly over the telephone to a sorely puzzled officer of the law. When she hung up she was red as a newborn baby. "That will be *quite* enough of this crazy nonsense, Mr. Queen!" she snarled. And then she collapsed in a chair and laughed hysterically and shrieked: "Oh, I knew you were making the mistake of your life when you married that beast, Laura!" and laughed again like a madwoman.

The law arrived in fifteen minutes, accompanied by a howling siren and personified by a stocky brick-faced man in chief's stripes and a gangling young policeman.

"I'm Naughton," he said shortly. "What the devil's goin' on here?"

Ellery said: "Ah, Chief Naughton. I'm Queen's son—Inspector Richard Queen of Centre Street. How d'ye do?"

"Oh!" said Naughton. He turned on Mrs. Mansfield sternly. "Why didn't you say Mr. Queen was here, Mrs. Mansfield? You ought to know—"

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"Oh, I'm sick of the lot of you!" screamed the old lady. "Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense from the instant this weekend began! First that awful actress-woman there, in her short skirt and legs and things, and then this—this—"

Naughton rubbed his chin. "Come over here, Mr. Queen, where we can talk like human beings. What the deuce happened?"

Ellery with a sigh told him. As he spoke, the chief's face grew redder and redder. "You mean you're serious about this business?" he rumbled at last. "It sounds plain crazy to me. Mr. Owen's gone off his nut and he's playing jokes on you people. Good God, you can't take this thing serious!"

"I'm afraid," murmured Ellery, "we must. . . . What's that? By heaven, if that's another manifestation of our playful ghost—!" And he dashed toward the door while Naughton gaped and pulled it open, to be struck by a wave of dusk. On the porch lay the fifth parcel, a tiny one this time.

The two officers darted out of the house, flashlights blinking and probing. Ellery picked up the packet with eager fingers. It was addressed in the now-familiar scrawl to Mrs. Paul Gardner. Inside were two identically shaped objects: chessmen, kings. One was white and the other was black.

"Who plays chess here?" he drawled.

"Richard," shrieked Mrs. Owen. "Oh my God, I'm going mad!"

Investigation proved that the two kings from Richard Owen's chess set were gone.

The local officers came back, rather pale and panting. They had found no one outside. Ellery was silently studying the two chessmen.

"Well?" said Naughton, drooping his shoulders.

"Well," said Ellery quietly. "I have the most brilliant notion, Naughton. Come here a moment." He drew Naughton aside and began to speak rapidly in a low voice. The others stood limply about, twitching with nervousness. There was no longer any pretense of self-control. If this was a joke, it was a ghastly one indeed. And Richard Owen looming in the background . . .

The chief blinked and nodded. "You people," he said shortly, turning to them, "get into that library there." They gaped. "I mean it! The lot of you. This tomfoolery is going to stop right now."

"But, Naughton," gasped Mrs. Mansfield, "it couldn't be any of us who sent those things. Mr. Queen will tell you we weren't out of his sight today—"

"Do as I say, Mrs. Mansfield," snapped the officer.

They trooped, puzzled, into the library. The policeman rounded up Millan, the cook, the maid, and went with them.

Nobody said anything; nobody looked at anyone else. Minutes passed; a half-hour; an hour. There was the silence of the grave from beyond the door to the living room. They strained their ears. . . .

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At seven-thirty the door was jerked open and Ellery and the chief glowered in on them. "Everybody out," said Naughton shortly. "Come on, step on it."

"Out?" whispered Mrs. Owen. "Where? Where is Richard? What—"

The policeman herded them out. Ellery stepped to the door of the den and pushed it open and switched on the light and stood aside.

"Will you please come in here and take seats," he said drily; there was a tense look on his face and he seemed exhausted.

Silently, slowly, they obeyed. The policeman dragged in extra chairs from the living room. They sat down. Naughton drew the shades. The policeman closed the door and set his back against it.

Ellery said tonelessly: "In a way this has been one of the most remarkable cases in my experience. It's been unorthodox from every angle. Utterly nonconforming. I think, Miss Willowes, the wish you expressed Friday night has come true. You're about to witness a slightly cockeyed exercise in criminal ingenuity."

"Crim—" Mrs. Gardner's full lips quivered. "You mean—there's been a crime?"

"Quiet," said Naughton harshly.

"Yes," said Ellery in gentle tones, "there has been a crime. I might say—I'm sorry to say, Mrs. Owen—a major crime."

"Richard's d—"

"I'm sorry." There was a little silence. Mrs. Owen did not weep; she seemed dried out of tears. "Fantastic," said Ellery at last. "Look here." He sighed. "The crux of the problem was the clock. The Clock That Wasn't Where It Should Have Been, the clock with the invisible face. You remember I pointed out that, since I hadn't seen the reflection of the luminous hands in that mirror there, the clock must have been moved. That was a tenable theory. But it wasn't the *only* theory."

"Richard's dead," said Mrs. Owen, in a wondering voice.

"Mr. Gardner," continued Ellery quickly, "pointed out one possibility: that the clock may still have been over this door, but that something or someone may have been standing in front of the mirror. I told you why that was impossible. But," and he went suddenly to the tall mirror, "there was still another theory which accounted for the fact that I hadn't seen the luminous hands' reflection. And that was: that when I opened the door in the dark and peered in and saw nothing, the clock was still there but the *mirror* wasn't!"

Miss Willowes said with a curious dryness: "But how could that be, Mr. Queen? That—that's silly."

"Nothing is silly, dear lady, until it is proved so. I said to myself: How could it be that the mirror wasn't there at that instant? It's apparently a solid part of the wall, a built-in section in this modern room." Something glimmered in Miss Willowes's eyes. Mrs. Mansfield was staring straight before her, hands clasped tightly in her lap. Mrs. Owen was looking at Ellery with glazed eyes, blind

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and deaf. "Then," said Ellery with another sigh, "there was the very odd nature of the packages which have been descending upon us all day like manna from heaven. I said this was a fantastic affair. Of course it must have occurred to you that someone was trying desperately to call our attention to the secret of the crime."

"Call our at—" began Gardner, frowning.

"Precisely. Now, Mrs. Owen," murmured Ellery softly. "The first package was addressed to you. What did it contain?" She stared at him without expression. There was a dreadful silence. Mrs. Mansfield suddenly shook her, as if she had been a child. She started, smiled vaguely; Ellery repeated the question.

And she said, almost brightly: "A pair of Richard's sport oxfords."

He winced. "In a word, *shoes.* Miss Willowes," and despite her nonchalance she stiffened a little, "you were the recipient of the second package. And what did that contain?"

"Jonathan's toy boats," she murmured.

"In a word, again—*ships.* Mrs. Mansfield, the third package was sent to you. It contained what, precisely?"

"Nothing." She tossed her head. "I still think this is the purest drivel. Can't you see you're driving my daughter—all of us—insane? Naughton, are you going to permit this farce to continue? If you know what's happened to Richard, for goodness' sake tell us!"

"Answer the question," said Naughton with a scowl.

"Well," she said defiantly, "a silly envelope, empty, and sealed with our own wax."

"And again in a word," drawled Ellery, *"sealing-wax.* Now, Gardner, to you fell the really whimsical fourth bequest. It was—?"

"Cabbage," said Gardner with an uncertain grin.

"Cabbages, my dear chap; there were two of them. And finally, Mrs. Gardner, you received what?"

"Two chessmen," she whispered.

"No, no. Not just two chessmen, Mrs. Gardner. Two *kings."* Ellery's gray eyes glittered. "In other words, in the order named we were bombarded with gifts . . ." he paused and looked at them, and continued softly, *"'of shoes and ships and sealing-wax, of cabbages and kings.'"*

There was the most extraordinary silence. Then Emmy Willowes gasped: "The Walrus and the Carpenter. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland!"*

"I'm ashamed of you, Miss Willowes. Where precisely does Tweedledee's Walrus speech come in Carroll's duology?"

A great light broke over her eager features. *"Through the Looking Glass!"*

"Through the Looking Glass," murmured Ellery in the crackling silence that followed. "And do you know what the subtitle of

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Through the Looking Glass is?"

She said in an awed voice: *"And What Alice Found There."*

"A perfect recitation, Miss Willowes. We were instructed, then, to go through the looking glass and, by inference, find something on the other side connected with the disappearance of Richard Owen. Quaint idea, eh?" He leaned forward and said brusquely: "Let me revert to my original chain of reasoning. I said that a likely theory was that the mirror didn't reflect the luminous hands because the mirror wasn't there. But since the wall at any rate is solid, the mirror itself must be movable to have been shifted out of place. How was this possible? Yesterday I sought for two hours to find the secret of that mirror—or should I say . . . looking glass?" Their eyes went with horror to the tall mirror set in the wall, winking back at them in the glitter of the bulbs. "And when I discovered the secret, I looked *through the looking glass* and what do you suppose I—a clumsy Alice, indeed!—found there?"

No one replied.

Ellery went swiftly to the mirror, stood on tiptoe, touched something, and something happened to the whole glass. It moved forward as if on hinges. He hooked his fingers in the crack and pulled. The mirror, like a door, swung out and away, revealing a shallow closetlike cavity.

The women with one breath screamed and covered their eyes.

The stiff figure of the Mad Hatter, with Richard Owen's unmistakable features, glared out at them—a dead, horrible, baleful glare.

Paul Gardner stumbled to his feet, choking and jerking at his collar. His eyes bugged out of his head. "O-O-Owen," he gasped. "Owen. He *can't* be here. I b-b-buried him myself under the big rock behind the house in the woods. Oh my God." And he smiled a dreadful smile and his eyes turned over and he collapsed in a faint on the floor.

Ellery sighed. "It's all right now, De Vere," and the Mad Hatter moved and his features ceased to resemble Richard Owen's magically. "You can come out now. Admirable bit of statuary histrionics. And it turned the trick, as I thought it would. There's your man, Mr. Naughton. And if you'll question Mrs. Gardner, I believe you'll find that she's been Owen's mistress for some time. Gardner obviously found it out and killed him. Look out—there *she* goes, too!"

"What I can't understand," murmured Emmy Willowes after a long silence late that night, as she and Mr. Ellery Queen sat side by side in the local bound for Jamaica and the express for Pennsylvania Station, "is—" She stopped helplessly. "I can't understand so many things, Mr. Queen."

"It was simple enough," said Ellery wearily, staring out the window at the rushing dark countryside.

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"But who is that man—that De Vere?"

"Oh, he! A thespian acquaintance of mine temporarily 'at liberty.' He's an actor—does character bits. You wouldn't know him, I suppose. You see, when my deductions had led me to the looking glass and I examined it and finally discovered its secret and opened it, I found Owen's body lying there in the Hatter costume—"

She shuddered. "Much too realistic drama to my taste. Why didn't you announce your discovery at once?"

"And gain what? There wasn't a shred of evidence against the murderer. I wanted time to think out a plan to make the murderer give himself away. I left the body there—"

"You mean to sit there and say you knew Gardner did it all the time?" she demanded, frankly sceptical.

He shrugged. "Of course. The Owens had lived in that house barely a month. The spring on that compartment is remarkably well concealed; it probably would never be discovered unless you knew it existed and were looking for it. But I recalled that Owen himself remarked Friday night that Gardner had designed 'this development.' I had it then, naturally. Who more likely than the architect to know the secret of such a hidden closet? Why he designed and had built a secret panel I don't know; I suppose it fitted into some architectural whim of his. So it had to be Gardner, you see." He gazed thoughtfully at the dusty ceiling of the car. "I reconstructed the crime easily enough. After we retired Friday night Gardner came down to have it out with Owen about Mrs. Gardner—a lusty wench, if I ever saw one. They had words; Gardner killed him. It must have been an unpremeditated crime. His first impulse was to hide the body. He couldn't take it out Friday night in that awful rain without leaving traces on his nightclothes. Then he remembered the panel behind the mirror. The body would be safe enough there, he felt, until he could remove it when the rain stopped and the ground dried to a permanent hiding place; dig a grave, or whatnot. . . . He was stowing the body away in the closet when I opened the door of the den; that was why I didn't see the reflection of the clock. Then, while I was in the library, he closed the mirror-door and dodged upstairs. I came out quickly, though, and he decided to brazen it out; even pretended he thought I might be 'Owen' coming up.

"At any rate, Saturday night he drugged us all, took the body out, buried it, and came back and dosed himself with the drug to make his part as natural as possible. He didn't know I had found the body behind the mirror Saturday afternoon. When, Sunday morning, I found the body gone, I knew of course the reason for the drugging. Gardner, by burying the body in a place unknown to anyone—without leaving, as far as he knew, even a clue to the fact that murder had been committed at all—was naturally doing away with the pri-

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mary piece of evidence in any murder case . . . the corpus delicti. . . . Well, I found the opportunity to telephone De Vere and instruct him in what he had to do. He dug up the Hatter's costume somewhere, managed to get a photo of Owen from a theatrical office, came down here. . . . We put him in the closet while Naughton's man was detaining you people in the library. You see, I had to build up suspense, make Gardner give himself away, break down his moral resistance. He had to be forced to disclose where he had buried the body; and he was the only one who could tell us. It worked."

The actress regarded him sidewise out of her clever eyes. Ellery sighed moodily, glancing away from her slim legs outstretched to the opposite seat. "But the most puzzling thing of all," she said with a pretty frown. "Those perfectly fiendish and fantastic packages. Who sent them, for heaven's sake?"

Ellery did not reply for a long time. Then he said drowsily, barely audible above the clatter of the train: "You did, really."

"I?" She was so startled that her mouth flew open.

"Only in a manner of speaking," murmured Ellery, closing his eyes. "Your idea about running a mad tea-party out of *Alice* for Master Jonathan's delectation—the whole pervading spirit of the Reverend Dodgson—started a chain of fantasy in my own brain, you see. Just opening the closet and saying that Owen's body had been there, or even getting De Vere to act as Owen, wasn't enough. I had to prepare Gardner's mind psychologically, fill him with puzzlement first, get him to realize after a while where the gifts with their implications were leading. . . . Had to torture him, I suppose. It's a weakness of mine. At any rate, it was an easy matter to telephone my father, the inspector; and he sent Sergeant Velie down and I managed to smuggle all those things I'd filched from the house out into the woods behind and hand good Velie what I had. . . . He did the rest, packaging and all."

She sat up and measured him with a severe glance. "Mr. Queen! Is that cricket in the best detective circles?"

He grinned sleepily. "I had to do it, you see. Drama, Miss Willowes. You ought to be able to understand that. Surround a murderer with things he doesn't understand, bewilder him, get him mentally punch-drunk, and then spring the knockout blow, the crusher. . . . Oh, it was devilish clever of me, I admit."

She regarded him for so long and in such silence and with such supple twisting of her boyish figure that he stirred uncomfortably, feeling an unwilling flush come to his cheeks. "And what, if I may ask," he said lightly, "brings that positively lewd expression to your Peter Pannish face, my dear? Feel all right? Anything wrong? By George, how *do* you feel?"

"As Alice would say," she said softly, leaning a little toward him, "curiouser and curiouser." ●

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PEARL FROM IPANEMA

by Edward D. Hoch

December 2005 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Edward D. Hoch's first fiction publication, but decades of success haven't stopped him from trying new approaches to his work. The Stanton and Ives series, to which this story belongs, has many classical components. But it also features edgier protagonists and more hardboiled plot elements than other Hoch series. †

Before Ives and I had been in Rio four hours I knew we were in big trouble. We'd been on enough of these courier jobs to realize that they often involved shady doings of one sort or another, but this was our first experience with voodoo.

It had started back in New York on the day after Christmas, when a Brazilian journalist named Augusto Orti hired us to fly to Rio de Janeiro and return with a pearl of great price. He told us virtually nothing about it except that a priest in the Ipanema district would deliver the pearl to us.

Ives was excited from the beginning. "Ipanema! That's the beach they wrote the song about! I'm packing my bikini."

"I think the name means *bad fishing,*" I told her, but she wasn't to be deterred.

"I won't be fishing, Stanton. I'll be sunbathing."

So here we were in Rio on December twenty-ninth, temperature seventy-one degrees, having just checked into our hotel, bound for the Church of St. Sebastian to collect this pearl of great price and transport it back to New York, where Augusto Orti was awaiting it. The priest's name was Father Aaral and his church was located on Rua Visconde de Pirajá, a street of bookshops, banks, and art galleries two blocks from the beach. The white church with stark blue doors dated from the nineteenth century and seemed out of place in a neighborhood of high-rise apartments and modern architecture.

Father Aaral proved to be a stocky, balding man who spoke perfect English and struck me as a Latin version of Father Brown. He ushered us into his little rectory office and said, "You are the couriers sent by Augusto Orti. Did he explain the nature of your mission?"

It was Ives who answered. She was wearing khaki pants and a fringed top just barely acceptable for a church visit, but Father

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Aaral seemed not to notice. "He said only that we were to obtain from you a pearl of great price and deliver it to him in New York." She passed him the letter of introduction our client had given us.

"This seems in order," the priest agreed. "I must ask you to give me a half-hour to obtain Mr. Orti's pearl." He glanced at the wall clock. "Come back at three o'clock and we will complete the transaction."

"He said nothing about money," I pointed out. "We assume you've already been compensated."

"Indeed I have been. Please return at three o'clock."

Back on the street, Ives asked, "Why couldn't we have waited there?"

"Probably because he didn't want us to witness the delivery of the pearl. Come on, let's stroll down to the beach."

It was just two blocks away, but we had to cross a busy Avenida Vieira Souto to reach it. It had three lanes in each direction, with traffic islands in the middle. Most of the women along the beach still wore bikinis, but Ives was horrified to see how overweight some of them were. Two women stood flirting with a young man on a motorcycle but it didn't look as if either would be offered a ride. "This is the beach they wrote the song about?" Ives asked in disbelief.

"That was forty years ago. Times change."

"They certainly do!"

But there were plenty of tanned healthy bodies on view as well, and Ipanema was crowded with yellow beach umbrellas advertising Skol beer. I knew Ives would want to come back here with her bikini.

When we returned to the rectory of St. Sebastian Church, we found Father Aaral waiting for us in his office. He'd been shot once between the eyes and there was no sign of the pearl. On his desk was a little voodoo doll with pins stuck through it.

I figured we were in no position to call the police. It was better to walk away fast and consider our next move carefully. There'd been no housekeeper to admit us, and to my knowledge no one had seen us enter the rectory either time. Rather than exit directly to the street, we walked through a covered passage to the church itself, moving down the dim aisles lit only by flickering vigil lights and sunlight through grimy stained-glass windows. The place was empty except for a young long-haired woman kneeling in one of the pews.

Then we were back on Visconde de Pirajá, trying to blend into the crowd. But with Ives's long legs she easily outpaced me and I had to hurry to keep abreast of her. "Slow down," I told her. "You're attracting attention." In truth, she could do that just by standing still.

"What do we do now?" she asked. "Phone our client? Go home without the pearl?"

"Or else find it. Whoever killed Father Aaral probably took it."

"If it was just a robbery, why leave that voodoo doll?"

It was a good question, and I didn't have an immediate answer.

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"Let's go back to the room and lie down. Maybe something will come to us."

Ives snorted. "You know the only thing that will come to us lying down."

"I was thinking of the evening news. By that time a housekeeper or someone will have found the body and we might learn something. How's your Portuguese?"

"Not good enough for the evening news, but we can give it a try."

It was the lead item, and I roused Ives enough to get the gist of it. They started with a file clip of Father Aaral speaking at some community gathering, denouncing the amount of illegal gambling used to fund the pre-Lenten carnival each year. Then the announcer's voice-over reported his murder. There was a shot of the church with police cars parked in front, and then something about the voodoo doll. They switched to a taped interview with a Professor Jasmine from, Ives translated for me, the Museum of the Imperial Brotherhood, which contained religious objects and other items. He held up a voodoo doll, but not the same one we'd seen on Father Aaral's desk.

"I couldn't catch all of what he was saying," Ives admitted.

"That's all right. I think we need to visit the professor in the morning."

The Museum of the Imperial Brotherhood was located behind a tiny white baroque church named Our Lady of the Glory of the Knoll. The church dated from Colonial times, completed in 1739, and sat on a hillside overlooking a picturesque harbor of luxury yachts. It was reached by flights of steps or by a small funicular, one of a few still operating among the Rio hills. Ives and I took the funicular like regular tourists. "I'm not walking through the church," she decided when we reached the top. "One dead priest is enough for this trip!"

"Come on," I insisted, and she followed with some reluctance. The interior and the sacristy were beautifully decorated with blue and white tiles depicting Biblical scenes, but we encountered no priest, living or dead.

Around the back we came upon the museum. In person, Professor Jasmine himself presented an almost clerical appearance, which seemed somehow in keeping with the religious artifacts and imperial treasures that resided there. He wore a black suit and shirt, and he was short enough so that I could see the bare crown of his head, like the tonsure of a religious order. "This is Juliet Ives and I'm Walt Stanton," I said by way of introduction. "We saw you on the news last night. About that priest's killing."

He nodded. "A terrible tragedy. Did you know Father Aaral?" His English was good, though with a thick accent.

"No," Ives said, "but we had an appointment to see him. You were a friend of his?"

"Certainly! He supplied our little museum with religious articles

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from time to time. We have a fine collection of objects bequeathed by the country's aristocracy."

"You implied on television that voodoo might be involved," I told him. "That's if we understood you correctly."

"The police found a voodoo doll on his desk." He reached over to pick up one from his own desk. It was the figure of a girl, with strands of long hair and a few scraps of colored cloth suggesting a dress. A mouth and eyes had been painted on the face. It was the same doll he'd held up on television. "Some say there is no real voodoo practiced in Rio, but there are the spirit cults. Do you know anything about them?"

"Not much," Ives admitted.

"The spirit cults have close connections to the Catholic Church. Of course the country is eighty percent Catholic so that's not too surprising. Like the more traditional voodoo cults of the West Indies, they are a combination of African cult worship and elements borrowed from the Catholic religion. The cult of Candomble actually climaxes its month-long initiation ceremony by taking new members to hear Mass in a nearby church or cathedral. Father Aaral had them in his church on occasion, though the Catholic establishment is, of course, opposed to the spirit cults. There is also a man named Roberto Manta who claims to use the powers of the spirit cults to perform miraculous cures. He says he is a descendent of our most famous spirit healer, Jose Arigo, killed in a nineteen seventy-one car crash. Like Arigo, he sometimes performs cures and delicate surgery with his bare hands or a kitchen knife. You can see him work his wonders at the beach tonight. The night before New Year's Eve is an important event, especially for the Umbanda cult."

"Is there anything in these cures of his that might involve a valuable pearl?" Ives wanted to know.

"Not really, although statues of the she-devil Pomba Gira sometimes show her wearing a necklace of large pearls."

Ives was making notes as he spoke. I asked, "How would we contact Manta or one of the cults?"

"Manta is associated with the Umbanda cult. Go to the cemetery of Inhaúma tonight, close to midnight. Both the good and the evil spirit cults are likely to be active there before New Year's Eve. Look for a young girl with a flower in her hair who sells candles near the gate. But I warn you, it could be dangerous. If you go, take some popcorn. Some say it is the Devil's favorite delicacy."

Over dinner we debated the wisdom of venturing to a strange graveyard at midnight to meet some members of a devil cult. "If they killed Father Aaral, they'd probably kill us, too," Ives reasoned, and I couldn't argue with that. "But it's almost certain that he was killed for the pearl. Our only hope of recovering it is to contact them somehow."

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It was later, over our cups of choice Brazilian coffee, that we noticed two young women circulating among the tables. The more attractive of the two, with long black hair, came by our table with slips of paper. "You take a chance on animal game?" she asked in broken English.

"The what?" Ives asked.

"Animal game, *jogo do bicho.*"

"Where are the animals?" I asked. The slips were printed with grids of numbers, looking not unlike some of the lottery tickets back home.

"Use to be animal," she said. "Now numbers."

Ives was about to shoo her away when I held out my hand for a slip. "How much?"

"Any amount you wish."

"Five *reis,*" I decided. That was a bit under two dollars.

I circled some numbers on the slip and handed it back, along with a couple of dollar bills. She seemed pleased to get the American money. "When is the drawing?" I asked.

"Soon. Two hour." She pocketed the money and started to move on.

I reached out a hand to stop her. "This is an illegal numbers game, isn't it?"

She tried to appear confused. "Illegal? I do not understand."

"How do we know we'll be paid if we win? Will you stay here?"

"Stanton," Ives tried to caution me as a second woman joined us. She was a bit older, with lighter skin and streaks of blond in her hair. I could detect the odor of cigar smoke clinging to her garments.

"What is the trouble, Junho?" she wanted to know, slipping her own pad of lottery tickets out of sight.

"No trouble," I said. "Sit down here," I told the women, pointing to the empty chairs at our table. They hesitated and then obeyed me. "What are your names?"

Ives looked at me as if I was crazy. "Junho Iraga," the younger one replied, pronouncing the first name *zhoonyoo.*

"That's June," Ives said, playing along with me. "May we call you June?"

"*Sim,*" she answered with a shrug, and then quickly translated for us. "That is yes."

"Are you comfortable speaking English?"

"Yes."

I turned to the older one. "Who are you?"

"Renata," she answered, looking dour.

I decided Ives needed an explanation for my action. "Miss Iraga was at Father Aaral's church. I saw her praying as we left."

She made no effort to deny it. Instead she said simply, "I do not kill priest."

"But you followed us back here to our hotel yesterday. You found an excuse to approach us just now."

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"Renata and I sell the animal game," she insisted.

Studying her face up close, I judged her to be in her mid twenties, with a fairly attractive face set off by the long black hair that framed it and reached halfway down her back. She was dark-skinned, though with features that suggested mixed blood. Ives joined in the questioning, leaning forward to grasp her hand in a gesture of friendship. "June, do you know who killed Father Aaral?"

"Bad people. Only bad people kill priest."

"Did you see them?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know anything about a pearl of great price?" I asked.

"It is heaven. Father Aaral teaches us that."

"But perhaps it is also something else. Does it have some connection with voodoo, with the spirit cults? The she-devil Pomba Gira is said to wear a necklace of large pearls."

June Iraga shuddered and crossed herself at my words. "No, no! It is not Pomba Gira's pearl!" she insisted.

"Let her alone," the other woman said. "We know nothing." She stood up to leave. "Come, Junho."

"Wait!" I commanded. Taking a gamble, I said, "If you leave here, June, we will report you to the police for selling lottery tickets." I had no idea if it was illegal, but they'd seemed a bit secretive about it.

June turned to her friend. "You go, I stay with them."

"Tell us about the Inhauma graveyard at midnight," I said. "Is that where we will find the pearl? Is it being used in some sort of voodoo rite?" Renata retreated quickly at my words, heading for the door, but June stayed.

"I know nothing! The only spirit I know is Yemanjá, the goddess who emerges from the sea each New Year's Eve to answer the people's prayers."

"That's tomorrow night," Ives noted.

"No one will be at the cemetery then," she told us. "They will be lighting candles and dancing at Copacabana and Ipanema."

"Could you take us to Inhaúma cemetery tonight?" I asked. "We will pay you."

"What do you seek there?" she asked.

"The healer Roberto Manta, among others. We've been told he derives his power from the spirit cults."

She nodded. "He will be there tonight. The night before Yemanjá is an important one for the Umbanda cult. I will take you there."

We arranged to meet in our hotel lobby at ten-thirty. I suspected we'd seen the last of June Iraga, but Ives wasn't so sure. When we came down from our room a bit after ten, she even went across the street to an all-night store and returned with a bag of popcorn.

"Ives," I said with a groan.

"It's the Devil's favorite delicacy, according to Professor Jasmine. We have to be prepared for anything."

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June Iraga walked into the lobby at 10:25, wearing a black sweater and jeans. Perhaps that was what one wore when meeting the Devil in a cemetery at midnight.

Surprisingly, she had a small car parked outside. I'd assumed we'd be taking a taxi. "Oh," she said as if just remembering, "you are a small winner in the lottery." She handed over ten reis, double what I'd bet. I couldn't help noticing that her English was better than it had been earlier. I glanced at Ives and thought she'd noticed it, too.

"Thanks," I said, pocketing the money. "Let's get going, then."

She was a good driver, negotiating the dimly lit roads beyond the central city until we came upon a long stretch without houses, with only the stone walls of a cemetery along our right side. "This is Inhaúma," she told us, slowing the car to a stop. "See the open bottle of *cachaça* on the ground? It is an alcoholic sugar-cane drink said to be the Devil's favorite. That and the cigars are left to appease him."

"I'm sure some tramp will come along to enjoy them."

She shook her head. "Not for many hours. Very few people are brave enough, or foolish enough, to steal from the Devil."

We'd left the car, with Ives still carrying her popcorn, and walked about twenty yards to the cemetery entrance. There I saw the girl Professor Jasmine had mentioned. She had a flower in her hair and was seated against the wall selling candles. The black hair flowed down her back, much like June's. I bent to buy a candle and handed her some of our lottery winnings. "We seek the spirit healer, Roberto Manta," I said softly.

She didn't answer and Ives asked, "*Entende?* Do you understand?"

Finally the girl nodded and reached out her hand for more money. Then she stood up and indicated we should follow her into the cemetery. Off in the distance, among the tombstones, we could see the glow of torches. Then the sound of chanting reached us, along with a strong odor of cigar smoke. A native woman with beads and crosses dangling from her neck crossed our path, a cigar in her mouth. She seemed vaguely familiar, like a figure from a dream. Presently our guide motioned for us to stop, and went forward alone to a slender man with a neatly trimmed black beard. I noticed she'd lost the flower from her hair. The bearded man listened for a moment and then she pointed in our direction.

I held up my candle in a gesture of greeting. He motioned us forward, but June hung back in the shadows. "You are the healer, Roberto Manta?" I asked. He gave barely a nod of admission. Up close, even in the dim firelight, his deep brown eyes struck me.

"I am Manta," he said.

"The spirit healer?"

He bowed his head. "I am a direct descendant of Jose Arigo, our greatest healer. What is your ailment?" He glanced toward Ives, and then asked me, "Do you need an aphrodisiac?"

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"That's not his problem," Ives assured the healer.

"I thought, in one so young—"

"Father Aaral was murdered yesterday and a pearl was stolen from him," I explained. "The killing seems to be linked to voodoo or the spirit cults. We were told you might be able to help us."

He smiled sadly. "I heal the body, not the soul. I cannot help you. But I do say this: Many evils attributed to voodoo have more worldly causes."

"Do you know anything about the missing pearl?"

At that moment the chanting seemed to surge, and Manta turned toward it, drawn as a moth to a flame. "They need me now," he said, moving away. "Be at the beach tomorrow. There will be fireworks." Then he was gone, melting into the crowd of dancers among the gravestones.

"We'd better get back," I told Ives. "There is nothing to be learned here."

"Where's June?" she asked suddenly. It was true there was no sign of our companion.

"That chanting may have frightened her," I said. "She's probably back at the car."

We returned the way we had come, following the pathway as best we could. The chanting had grown louder again, seeming to swell up on all sides. Low clouds reflected the glow of the torches. Then suddenly, in the near darkness, Ives tripped over something and went down, giving a muffled cry.

"Are you all right?" I asked, helping her up.

"I—I think so. There's a body here!"

I bent down with my candle for a closer look. When I saw the long black hair I thought at first it might be June, but then I saw her face and realized it was the girl who'd sold us the candle. Her throat had been cut with a sudden, vicious slash. "Let's get out of here," I said, grabbing Ives by the arm. But already a young man had appeared on the path, a knife in his hand. Ives didn't hesitate. She threw the popcorn into his face and we ran.

"Was that the Devil?" I asked when we reached the road.

"I didn't bother to ask."

There was no sign of June Iraga at the car, but luckily for us she'd left the doors unlocked. "Where could she be?" I wondered.

"Dead, like the girl," Ives suggested. "Check the glove compartment. Maybe she hid an extra ignition key in there."

But I found only a Portuguese paperback, an English-language pamphlet about birthstones, and an extra pad of the lottery tickets she'd been selling. "No luck."

"Let's wait a few minutes. Maybe she'll appear."

And she did, about five minutes later, as the graveyard chanting swelled once again. "We thought you were dead," I told her.

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"I saw a man in a black suit and top hat," she told us. "It is one of the Devil's guises."

"There was a killing tonight," Ives said. "We found the girl who sold candles. Her throat had been cut."

June shuddered. "All around us, death."

"Are they being killed for the pearl?"

"Perhaps." She gazed at me uncertainly. "What do you know of the pearl?"

"Ives and I were sent here to transport it to New York. When Father Aaral was murdered, we assumed his killer made off with the pearl, but now there's been another killing."

"There is no connection," June told us. "The priest died because he had the pearl. That girl had nothing to do with it."

"Except that she lost the flower from her hair," Ives observed. "Without the flower her hair looked pretty much like yours, June. And you're about the same height. It's dark in there, even with the torches. The killer might have been after you."

I knew she was right, and I think June knew it, too. She shuddered and looked away, staring out at the darkness, perhaps seeing her own reflection in the window. "Let me stay with you tonight," she said.

"We need the pearl," I told her.

She lifted her eyes toward mine. "It will be at the beach tomorrow night, for New Year's Eve. I will take you there."

She slept on the couch in our hotel room overnight and stayed with us all the next day. "Tell us about tonight," I suggested over breakfast. "What happens on New Year's Eve?"

"There is a huge fireworks display on Copacabana beach, with thousands of people there to watch. The crowd often spills over onto the adjoining Ipanema beach. It is also the annual festival of Yemanjá, the ruling divinity of the sea. Believers light candles and bonfires, often in the shape of circles and crosses. The beating of their drums can be mesmerizing. At midnight, when the fireworks display is at its peak, they rush to the water's edge with pleas for Yemanjá's favor. All night, even at dawn, women wade into the ocean with flowers and jewelry for her."

Ives perked up. "Jewelry? Like pearls?"

"Sometimes."

"Will the healer, Roberto Manta, be there?"

"I'm sure he will. Believers come to these ceremonies to be cured, or at least given hope. That is something men like Manta do well."

"Have you witnessed any of his cures?"

She nodded. "People believe what they want to believe. The mind can be very powerful at times."

In the day that we'd known her, June Iraga seemed to have grown in wisdom. I could hardly picture her now as the seller of

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lottery tickets who spoke only broken English. That had been a ruse, but for what purpose I couldn't imagine.

After breakfast she said she must call her friend. "Renata will be worried about me," she told us.

"I like those streaks in her hair," Ives commented. "They're different."

June snorted. "It is only a wig that she wears sometimes. She has black hair like the rest of us."

She used the phone in our room and spoke quickly to her friend in Portuguese.

"It's something about the lottery tickets," Ives whispered to me, translating as best she could.

"All I want is the pearl, so we can fly back home tomorrow."

June had arranged to meet Renata at the beach shortly before midnight. I hoped it had something to do with the missing pearl. In any event this would be our last day in Rio and there was no keeping Ives away from Ipanema. She put on her bikini, covered with a short terry-cloth robe, and we set off with June. Ever since Ives had raised the possibility that the girl in the cemetery had been mistaken for her, June had stuck close by us. I wondered what she would do when we were gone.

We found a spot on the crowded beach and spread our blanket. While Ives went dashing toward the surf, her long legs kicking up the sand as she ran, I asked June, "Why do you need to meet Renata tonight? Does she have the pearl?"

She didn't answer directly, saying only, "You will have the pearl in your possession before midnight."

Since I didn't tan as gracefully as Ives, I was quite content to stay out of the sun with June, under the beach umbrella we'd rented. Presently Ives joined us, droplets of water glistening on her body. "You missed the best part," she told me with a smile.

"I don't think so."

"Towel me off, will you?"

I ran the towel over her back and legs, and when she was mostly dry she stretched out on the blanket and dozed. The murders and the voodoo and the missing pearl seemed far away just then.

Toward evening the crowds and the excitement began to grow. "There is nothing like it in Rio, except Carnival," June assured us. We'd gone back to our room while Ives changed into a long cotton skirt with a beaded blouse and I put on a clean shirt. We ate downstairs in the hotel, and all the time June seemed restless, anticipating something I couldn't imagine.

An hour before midnight we arrived at the eastern end of Ipanema beach, where it almost touched Copacabana. The first familiar face we saw was that of Professor Jasmine from the museum. "I come here every year," he told us. "The story of the city is on this beach."

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But when June saw him she seemed terrified. We moved her away quickly, mixing with the chanting faithful who were lighting their candles and setting up statues of the sea goddess Yemanjá, clad in a blue gown and wearing a crown, looking for all the world like an image of the Blessed Virgin surrounded by flowers.

"This could almost be a Catholic church," Ives commented, "except for the drums."

Further along, we came upon Roberto Manta, placing his hands to the forehead of a supplicant. "Is he the one with the pearl?" I asked June.

"No," she said, and we stood for some time watching his healing ministry. Around us, worshipers were dancing and chanting. As midnight approached, their gyrations grew wilder. One girl was writhing on the sand and another seemed to have been taken by a wild seizure.

"They're on drugs or something," Ives decided, a bit frightened by what she was seeing.

Ahead, coming in our direction through the crowd, I could see June's friend Renata. Two young men followed close behind her and one of them could have been the knife-wielder from the cemetery. June gasped at the sight of them. "I must get out of here," she insisted, turning to run. "It was a mistake to come."

They hadn't yet spotted us through the crowd. I grabbed her by the shoulders. "The pearl!" I reminded her. "Where is the pearl?"

She tore away from me, terrified. "There is no pearl!" she shouted over the beating of the drums. "I am the pearl!"

"What?" I shouted back, not certain I'd heard her correctly. But then I knew that I had. I remembered the English-language booklet in the glove compartment of her car, the one on birthstones. Pearl was the birthstone for the month of June. Pearl had been a natural code name for someone named June.

"We're to bring you back with us to New York?" Ives asked. "What for?"

"Augusto Orti is a journalist. I have information about the illegal lottery, and how the numbers bosses use the money to fund their samba groups in the costly Carnival parades. The rivalry between these bosses is intense, and has led to more than a hundred killings in the past decade. They are like drug dealers in other areas. I took my information to Father Aaral and he put me in touch with Orti in New York. Father was to deliver me into your hands but they killed him first. Now they're coming for me. I thought Renata was my friend, but now I'm worried. She didn't know I was the pearl, but when you announced at the hotel that I had been in Father Aaral's church at the time of the killing, I saw the look on her face. I thought I could confront her tonight, perhaps learn even more about the lottery money, but now I see that she and those other two are determined to kill me."

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Overhead, the first of the night's fireworks whistled across the sky and exploded in a cascade of color. It was nearly midnight. "We have to get you out of here," I said. "Come on!"

Another skyrocket lit the faces of the revelers. Fifty feet away in the crowd, Renata and her cohorts had spotted us. "They're heading this way," Ives warned.

I tried to pull June along with us, but it was difficult to make fast progress in the sand. "When you mentioned that Renata's streaked hair was a wig, I remembered that native woman we passed in the cemetery, and the same foul cigar odor I'd smelled on Renata. She seemed vaguely familiar and that was why. I think Renata was in the cemetery last night. She was with the men who killed that girl, thinking it was you. She knew we would be there, because we mentioned it before she left us at the hotel."

"Did she kill the priest, too?" Ives asked, trying to keep up with us.

"Either she personally or those two who are with her. Leaving that voodoo doll was just a distraction. Remember in that news clip Father Aaral was denouncing the illegal lottery used to finance the Carnival. That was why they wanted him dead. He was threatening their operations by sending you to that journalist in New York. Who do they work for, June?"

"A man named Pratta. I will tell it all to Augusto Orti if I ever reach New York."

But just then her chances didn't look too good. The two men had spread out, coming at us from the sides. And in the flare of the overhead fireworks I saw that Renata had produced a knife. She was almost upon us when Ives backed into one of the circles of glowing candles. She scooped up a candle and hurled it at Renata. June tried to break away but I held her firm. I had no doubt the two men would shoot her if they had a clear target, the sound of their shots drowned out by the fireworks.

Renata lunged at June with her knife, but Ives grabbed her arm and twisted her around just as one of the gunmen fired. The bullet hit Renata high in the chest. Ives held her as a shield for another moment, until the gunmen realized what they'd done and turned to flee. Already police on duty for crowd control were moving in.

"Are you all right?" I asked Ives. She nodded, the front of her blouse covered with Renata's blood.

I turned to June, who was staring down at the body of her one-time friend. "There is no end to the killing," she said.

"You'll be in New York by tomorrow night," I promised.

After the police had rounded up the two men and taken statements from witnesses, Ives looked down at her blouse. "I really have to clean this blood off," she decided. She waded into the surf to wash herself and as she emerged a young girl brought her flowers, thinking she was Yemanjá. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE WIND

by Carmen Iarrera

"They say that it can reach up to a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour."

"What can?"

"The bora. You know, the wind around Trieste, the strongest in Italy. It can become really dangerous. I wonder what it's like to get caught in it."

He didn't answer. His eyes were fixed on the road; he was concentrating, and his jaw was quivering—his face had contracted. She sighed, mortified. It had been like this for months. He was always tired, increasingly on edge and irritable. He no longer smiled at her. Gone were the days when he'd come home with a bunch of flowers hidden behind his back. Restaurants were a thing of the past and, what baffled her more than anything, he no longer laughed at their usual jokes. He'd get home late, eat without caring what it was, and start to read the papers, oblivious to any of her attempts at small talk. She was far from happy about this but tried to find excuses for him.

It's because of his job, she told herself, that new assignment has him under too much pressure.

She tried, in every way possible, to make allowances for his bad behavior. If he tried to apologise for an outburst of temper, she'd immediately soften and try to comfort him.

"You work too hard," she'd say. "If only you could travel less, spend more time at home, relax a little."

But if he did stay home, it only made things worse, because then he'd turn all his anger back on her. "Not enough for you to organ-

Italy's Carmen Iarrera is the author of two spy novels, three mystery novels, and numerous short stories, in addition to many cartoons, radio plays, and telecasts. Her short stories have been translated around the world, with the English translations of several of them published in anthologies by Cumberland House and in *EQMM*. She has twice won the Gran Giallo Cattolica Award and has been the president of IACW-Italy.

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ize my life, is it? You want to poke your nose into my job now as well, don't you?" He'd stare at her coldly and grab the paper. And she'd go silent, pained.

Every day was like that, and it was getting worse, so when he suggested spending a weekend in Trieste, where they'd gone on their honeymoon, she had to stifle her cry of joy, knowing that even a show of pleasure could set him off. It seemed that anything these days could cast him into a bad mood.

But now, though he was sullen, at least they were travelling. And the idea had been his. She wanted to make him smile on this trip. What could she do that would make him smile? What about one of those childish games that used to make him laugh so lovingly?

She glanced at the speedometer. 140 kilometers. Too fast. She waited for him to finish overtaking. 130, here we go, 120 . . . perfect. She rolled down the window and shoved her head out. The wind, strong and rumbling, jerked her head backwards. It felt like a slap on the face, making her close her eyes and whipping back her hair. It took her breath away.

He was mouthing something, shouting something.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I wanted to see what a hundred-and-twenty-kilometer-per-hour wind felt like," she murmured, disheartened.

She could feel his contempt in the glance he directed at her. She tried to put it aside. She'd made a mistake, but sooner or later she'd find some little thing to make him laugh. She had to, or the weekend would be spoiled.

Huge, thick, unmoving clouds seemed to crown the city like dirty grey cotton wool. The pavement was clammy, the air sharp. The sea, lead-coloured, like the sky, rippled with long, powerful waves that strode to the horizon. She stifled a sigh. Not even the weather was on her side.

"Shall we go and get something to eat?" She smiled as if she didn't have a care in the world. They'd just unpacked.

"If you want."

"Maybe that little bistro where we went on our honeymoon is still there . . . you loved it there, remember? They made that piping hot pork broth with mustard."

"Makes no difference to me," he interrupted her with a grimace, which he then tried to counteract by stroking her shoulder.

He hadn't touched her for weeks, not even accidentally, not even when passing the salt.

They ordered the broth and, naturally, some of the strong red wine from the area. He knocked back three glasses as if it were water—as if he needed it.

People were talking about only one thing in that suffocating, hot restaurant: the wind. It was rising quickly. Even the TV said it

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would be violent.

Outside, the wind whipped. It messed up their hair, got into their jackets, caused their trouser bottoms to slap against their ankles. She forced herself not to complain about it. She tried to think how wonderful it would be if he suggested going back to their room, curling up under the sheets, hugging one another, and making love.

"Fancy a little walk?" he said instead. A rhetorical question, as he'd already moved off towards the shore. He seemed oddly animated, as if something had energized him—maybe the wine.

She watched him move away, hunched up against the increasingly bitter wind. He pressed ahead . . . one, two, three, four steps. She looked lovingly at his lopsided shoulders, his long stride, and his slightly rigid walk.

Melancholy as she was, that short distance between them suddenly seemed intolerable. Everything about the last few months seemed intolerable. All the hopes she'd pinned on being kind, patient, and understanding, time and time again, had vanished into thin air. This was it, she couldn't go on. She had to confront him, speak to him and clarify things.

She ran to catch up.

"Wait for me."

He turned around sharply. His eyes were hard.

"What is it?"

"Something's wrong—" She was shouting now so he could hear over the whistling wind. "Terribly wrong. I can't go on. Will you tell me what is happening? Why are you behaving like this? Why are you treating me this way? What the devil has got into you? Can't you see what you've become? You're disagreeable, irritable, and edgy. I can't speak to you anymore, everything I say is wrong. You're never satisfied. What's wrong, will you tell me?"

He looked at her as if he were incapable of speaking.

"Yes," he said eventually, "I'll tell you. I need to tell you. Let's go and sit down."

So there was something! But what?

She couldn't get the question out of her mind as she followed him, facing into the wind now, towards the jetty. It was ridiculous to go there: The wind gusts were so strong now they even made the lamppost lights flicker, and the waves, foamier and larger than ever, crashed against the huge dark mass of solid earth that projected out into the sea.

He sat on one of the bollards and she sat alongside him, half turned towards him, a precarious enough position even without all that wind and spray. She waited.

"There's someone else," he eventually said, staring at the horizon.

She didn't understand, or at least she pretended not to.

"What?"

"There's someone else," he repeated, louder now, without looking

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at her. "I don't know how it happened, but it did. That's it. There's nothing I can do about it."

Her heart skipped a beat and she felt a cold dizziness sweep over her. She stood up, as did he.

"What do you mean, 'That's it'?" she shouted. "That's it? Look at me!" He looked at her with the cold indifference of a stranger.

"I love someone else. I'm leaving you. I'm sorry."

Sorry? . . . He was leaving her for someone else?

He'd been deceiving her for months, she'd been beside herself, letting herself be humiliated. Because that's what she'd done by coddling him, always trying to get a smile out of him. He was sorry?! Years of love, dedication, tenderness—nothing. There was nothing left for him. He was sorry.

She was trembling. Shaking because of the icy cold inside her, the freezing wind, and the violent sprays of water that struck her like needles of ice. She thought she would faint. She moved backwards slowly until she could clutch onto a lamppost.

So, that was it. She'd been blind. Blind and stupid, so very stupid. She felt sorry for herself, terribly, terribly sorry. It was such an unbearable feeling that it soon changed into rancor and then, in turn, into a spasm of anger.

She looked at him, this thin figure struck by the howling wind, near the edge of an increasingly violent sea. And suddenly she felt that all the great, eternal love that she'd felt for him had turned into a clot of hatred.

A push. A simple push was all it needed for him to lose his balance and the wind and the sea would whisk him away. He would disappear, vanish into the deep, he and his vile selfishness and his feelings for another woman. He, with his horrible desire to abandon her, would go away.

She pulled away from the lamppost and swayed in the wind like a drunkard, her arms tense, hands held out in front of her, her eyes crazily unfocused.

And then it happened. A dull sound, like a roar, and a huge wave, higher than all the others, came right up to the dock. It took him, threw him up in the air, twirled him around, hurled him onto the pavement, and sucked him into the sea.

She remained where she was, staring into a void, with her hands still outstretched. And in the same way that love had transformed itself into hatred, the hatred turned back into love. A desperate, desolate, useless love.

Useless, just like her. Her arms fell to her sides and she looked around. It was all grey and rough and jolted by an ever-raging wind. She took a couple of steps forward to the place where he had just disappeared.

It would be easy. Very easy. She needn't do anything, just wait for another high wave, another powerful gust of wind. ●

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MAN ON A MISSION

by William Link

Amy Enders hated Fridays. It was always an interminably long day full of irritants in the form of impossible clients and their assorted problems, and this one was no exception. Her husband Rod was in San Francisco working on a case and wasn't due back until Sunday night. He had dumped the Fielding thing in her lap—a case she knew little or nothing about—and she had the unpleasant task of delivering the fruits of their investigation to Marcus Fielding himself that Friday morning.

She sat in their depressing little office in the run-down building that accommodated mostly accountants and orthodontists, Enders Investigations being the only anomaly. Sometimes in the elevator some of the so-called professional people gave her covert and snide looks as if she and Rod were running a call-girl service or something equally unsavory. She fantasized that one day one of those "solid citizens" would sheepishly approach them with an assignment to find a drug-dependent daughter or get the goods on a cheating wife.

Which brought her back to the Fielding affair. She looked at the videocassette her husband had left her, lying in her in-box like an anonymous incrimination. Outside, the Santa Ana winds howled, shrieking through the dry canyons like angry poltergeists, rattling the loose tiles on the roof.

Deborah, their one and only secretary, buzzed through on the intercom. "Mr. Fielding is here. He says you're expecting him."

"Yes. Send him in."

Fielding came in by himself, Deborah too lazy or disinterested to

William Link was first published in *EQMM* when he was just twenty years old. He co-authored "Whistle While You Work" (11/54) with the man who would become his longtime partner in television writing, Richard Levinson. Levinson and Link were already famous for TV shows such as *Columbo* when they brought the last of the Ellery Queen series to the small screen in 1975. Richard Levinson died in 1987. ✝

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escort him. He was a whipcord lean, dapper man in his early sixties, expensively dressed, with the gray, forbidding eyes of a judge. His lipless mouth was so tightly compressed it seemed, to Amy, like a barely visible suture.

"I'm Amy Enders," she said, giving him her hand. Then she closed the door on Deborah at her desk, who was holding her nose as if avoiding an offending smell.

"Where's your husband?" Fielding asked in a dry Midwestern accent. "He was supposed to be here."

"I'm sorry, but he had to fly to San Francisco early in the week. You can reach him by phone if you'd like."

"That won't be necessary."

She wondered how the words escaped his mouth's closed gateway.

"He said he found something out. Had something to show me."

"That's correct." She picked up the videocassette from the desk. Fielding regarded it as if she were holding a piece of excrement. "I'd like to show you this."

He didn't nod. He watched unblinking as she closed the venetian blinds, drew the curtains, the wind rattling the panes as if trying to bang its way in.

She inserted the video tape into the player on top of the television set, turning it on. She motioned to the deep leather chair in front of the screen, but Fielding shook his head, remained standing.

Have it your way, she thought.

She went back behind the desk, activated the machine with the remote. She hadn't seen the tape, but she sensed from Rod's few remarks that it wasn't going to be good—for Fielding. Rod took a perverse, almost wicked satisfaction from some of the things he uncovered, but that was the part of the job she never enjoyed. Maybe it was a male thing, adolescent, really, dislodging a rock and looking at all the small, scurrying slimy things underneath.

She was always disturbed when she saw that these tapes were in color, like some assembly-line Hollywood product. The first shot was taken by Rod through the rain-streaked window of his Nissan Maxima, but clean enough to show a couple crossing a parking lot toward a one-story building. The next shot identified the Jubilee Motel, a beige stone excrescence that advertised X-rated films to accompany its patrons' midafternoon trysts. She knew the motel was one of several on a dreary stretch of Ventura Boulevard in Studio City, only a few blocks away from where she was.

Rod's camcorder zoomed in on the couple as they entered the motel office—a young, stud-type man and a sedate-looking older woman, blond, in a designer raincoat over black slacks. The doorway swallowed them as the camera tilted up to show the Jubilee

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sign in lipstick-red neon script on the roof. Strictly a Rod directorial flourish, and she could picture the devilish bastard grinning.

Amy glanced over at Fielding, a dark silhouette, still as statuary, fixated on the screen. Wind scraped at the windows.

On the screen, a new angle materialized—the camera zoomed in on one of the motel windows through a light scrim of rain. The blond woman appeared for a brief moment, wearing now only a lacy brassiere holding her full, mature breasts. The young man's hand closed on her shoulder as she pulled the drapes shut.

Amy looked over at Fielding again, who was as still as a coiled spring in front of the set, but she saw his hand tighten into a fist. It was the first sign of any kind of emotion he had exhibited, and she was happy to learn that he wasn't as unfeeling as she had thought.

The next shot showed the couple leaving the motel, avoiding the glaring rain puddles, the man's arm laid possessively around her shoulders, the woman looking wan now, drained. She was a bit older than Amy had thought, early fifties, maybe, but well-preserved, pampered, probably with the help of a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon. A time stamp appeared in the lower corner: four forty-five.

The next shot showed a bungalow surrounded by trees and vegetation in fading sunlight as a sporty Porsche moved up a narrow drive—

"Shut it off."

Amy said, "But don't you—?"

His voice was cutting, glacial. "I don't want to see any more."

She nodded dutifully, killed the tape with the remote. She was suddenly reminded of a scene in a movie where Jack Nicholson shows a homely little man lewd photos of his wife. But she couldn't remember if he broke down . . .

She got up and was about to open the drapes when the laser voice commanded her again: "Leave them closed."

This had never happened before, even with Rod there. Usually the client just sat stonily or asked for a drink of water or something stronger, seemingly quasi-comfortable again with the bland sunlight in the room, a return to a world that would never be the same.

Fielding was still a silhouette, facing her now, but she could see both hands were bunched into fists at his sides. Weapons.

God, she thought, suppose he wants to attack me, take out his anger, his frustration? And then the image of the woman (she knew it was his wife) came back to her, the cupped breasts, the hand on the bare white shoulder.

"Are you all right, Mr. Fielding?" she asked. "Can I get you something, some coffee?"

"Yes," he said. "You may. The tape, please."

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She was amazed at his sang-froid, the tight inner control. She went to the VCR, pressed Eject, fumbled out the tape cassette. She knew he had to open his fist to receive it and it relieved her—momentarily.

"Thank you." It was slipped into his jacket pocket.

"Is—there anything else we can help you with, Mr. Fielding? My husband will be back Sunday night—"

"No."

"Then—that's it?" She tried a smile. "Our services—?"

"Are terminated." He opened the door to the reception room and she saw, incongruously, that his gray herringbone jacket matched his close-cut salt-and-pepper hair. And his eyes. "My office will send you a check."

He was gone before she could reply. Deborah stared at him as he moved swiftly past her and out the door to the elevator.

Amy looked at the television screen. It was black, a kinetic puzzle of squiggly forms, light fragments, innocent now of rain-swept parking lots and cheating wives. Marcus Fielding, she knew, was like a man who had just been shot out of a cannon—a concussion grenade with the pin pulled out—courtesy of Rod and herself.

The gleaming, new-model Mercedes proceeded south on the Hollywood Freeway, Amy following in her chugging Ford Citation. They were doing well, but Rod said they shouldn't throw away money on real estate, and that included fancy cars.

The winds had cleansed the city like a broom, and the Sierra Madres to the north were suddenly, impossibly, visible. She looked in the mirror at her pale, round little face, her minimal makeup faded. Why had a rugged, handsome man like Rod married her, an ex-social worker who always tried to leave the office to feed the dog and make dinner? Rod said she loved to collect strays, animal or human, but she hated cats and rarely helped the homeless.

The Mercedes exited on the Western Avenue ramp, and she stayed fairly close, doubting if Fielding was checking his rearview.

She followed the car south on Western and ended up watching it park at a grim, no-windows guns-and-ammo store. Fielding went quickly into the gray building, ramrod straight, a man on a mission.

She waited, her apprehension growing, too nervous to listen to the radio with its angry fusillades of talk-show callers. Fielding was no doubt getting a gun, one he had applied for three days earlier under the law, suspecting what Rod's investigation would confirm. She *had* to call Rod, but where could she find a pay phone?—certainly not in the gun store—there seemed to be no pay phones anymore on the streets. Her cell phone was back at the office, she had forgotten to take it on her rush out, and Rod had

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vetoed having a car phone in her Ford. Thank you, dear.

Fielding came out of the gun store, a small flat box under his arm. No doubt the three-day waiting period was over and he had legitimately purchased the firearm of his choice. What was it—a big, heavy Magnum, a nine-millimeter? She had learned a little about weapons over the years. Her father had been a cop and always kept his service revolver on a high shelf in his closet, not realizing that Amy and her younger sister were frightened of guns and would never go near one.

Her quarry swung his car in a U, tires screeching, heading back toward the freeway, and Amy waited, then followed suit. The afternoon was still radiant, as bright as a camcorder shot, but her mood had darkened.

She tailed the Mercedes back along the Hollywood Freeway, swinging south with it on the San Diego. She was pursuing a man she knew little about. She dimly remembered Rod telling her that he was a multimillionaire real-estate broker in Beverly Hills, a man of impeccable social standing whose family dated back almost a hundred years in a city that practically prided itself on having no past.

So why was she getting so worked up, so troubled, to the detriment of her afternoon appointments and commitments? Did she really think that this cold-fish businessman, feeling betrayed by his wife, his ego dented like a crumpled fender, was bent on revenge? And that she—ineffectual little Amy Enders—was going to somehow prevent this from happening?

Yes. She wished Rod could see her now, shadowing this potential murderer. Rod had always accused her of viewing the world through rose-colored contact lenses and had tried to focus her inner reality by making her part of his investigation business.

Fielding left the freeway at the Sunset exit and she tagged him into the exclusive Brentwood Park area where various actors and producers withdrew into their wooded estates behind high gates and security systems. The Mercedes disappeared up the pebbled drive toward a French Normandy house, the wind bending branches against its stone, fortresslike walls.

She barely had time to start to go after him on foot when the car bucketed down the drive again, racing through the narrow twisting roads back to Sunset. He seemed more purposeful now, lashed by both necessity and obsession.

Amy bit her lip and pressed down on the accelerator as the Mercedes moved at lightning speed on Sunset. It suddenly pulled into the full-service island of a gas station and Amy abruptly stopped at the side of the road, spotting a pay phone near the station's restroom. She left the motor running and ran to the phone, digging her credit card from her purse. Fielding was pacing at the

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rear of his car, his eyes downcast in a dark reverie while the attendant filled the tank.

At first she debated calling 911, knowing they'd never believe her since Fielding was an important member of the community and she had no proof. She managed to reach Rod's hotel in San Francisco and waited impatiently, watching the older man still pacing, as they rang the room. No one picked up.

She was biting her lip again, this time drawing blood, an alien copper taste in her dry mouth. Her heart was pumping like a piston.

The hotel clerk got on again. "Could I ask who's calling, please?"

"This is Mrs. Enders, his wife."

The man paused. "I was told, Mrs. Enders, that Mr. Enders was admitted to the hospital for an emergency appendectomy earlier this afternoon."

A fist clenched her heart. "My God," she managed to murmur. "Is he all right?"

"Yes. We believe so."

"Well, where can I call him?"

"That seems to be the problem—which hospital. No one seems to know where he was taken. But if you call back in an hour or so I'm sure we'll have the information."

Fielding, having paid the attendant, was climbing back in the car. "Okay, I'll call then. What's your name?"

"Clifford. Is there any number where we can reach *you?*"

"No—not right now, no." She saw exhaust spew from the Mercedes as the motor started. "I'll try to call back—"

She let the receiver dangle as she ran back to her car, glad that she had left the motor running.

Now she followed Fielding into the West Hollywood hills above the Sunset Strip. The winds had died down and a cool twilight had descended, the sky stained with red and white strips like a ragged flag. It seemed like a patriotic prelude to the coming night, but she felt jagged with adrenaline, saw the day moving relentlessly into something horrible and probably unpreventable—

The Mercedes parked on a hill, a dead-end little road bordered by masses of trees separated by chinks of dying sunlight. A moment later Fielding came out of the car holding something metallic at his side that caught the light. Amy had prudently parked to the side of the road below the brow of the hill, killing her parking lights so he couldn't see her if he looked back in her direction. Then he climbed swiftly up the steep incline, passing a few dark residences with listing mailboxes.

Amy followed, breathing hard, hugging the line of trees. Far below was the cityscape, mercifully vacuumed of smog, a few early

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lights sparkling in its denseness. She stopped to peer into the Mercedes, saw the flat box open on the passenger's seat, nothing inside.

Fielding had paused near the side of a house, a low-slung contemporary bungalow painted an eggshell white, glimmering in the deepening twilight.

Amy had stopped herself, welcoming the gathering darkness, her thoughts spinning, colliding: an emergency appendectomy, the facade of the Jubilee Motel with its brazen neon sign.

Rod was all right, she knew it; it was a routine operation these days. But he would kill her if he knew what she was doing. Rod was always coolly nonjudgmental: If their client was fool enough to vent his anger and frustration in a murderous way—let him. It was none of their business, they were merely messengers bringing good news or bad. Professionals who didn't take sides. *Shouldn't* take sides.

Fielding had opened the gate and was walking slowly down the brick steps to the front door of the house.

Amy ran the rest of the way, grateful she had gained her second wind, stopping at the open gate, then quietly, carefully, going down the steps.

At the door, Fielding pressed the doorbell, his right arm hanging by his side. She saw now there was a snub-nosed gun clutched in his fist. He moved jerkily, an automaton now, his hand still lingering near the bell.

Amy was halfway down the steps when Fielding raised the gun as the door opened. The blond woman in a negligee was standing in the doorway, blinking out into the fading light. Her face suddenly registered shock—and Amy struck Fielding's gun arm, deflecting it before he could fire. Now the young man appeared behind the woman, naked to the waist—

"Marcus—" he cried. "What are you—?"

Amy had fallen to her knees, trying to scramble up.

"Marcus, I love you," the young man exclaimed. "You know that. I—"

Fielding pushed the blond woman violently aside and, before Amy could stop him, pumped three rapid shots into the young man's chest. The woman's scream startled birds in the shrubbery.

Amy looked up into Fielding's frozen triumphant face, the searing knowledge canceling her shock. She had been wrong all the time: She had saved the wrong person.

Fielding had killed his lover who had betrayed him with his wife.

The woman was still screaming as Amy brought her hands to her face, covering her eyes. A crazy but calming thought was jumping through her head: Hell, it was only just another terrible Friday. . . . ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE

by Marcia Muller

I tossed the pine cone from hand to hand and looked up at the tree it had fallen from. It was perhaps twenty feet tall and very dense, with branches that swept the ground except on its left-hand side, where they were bent and sheared off. A young bristlecone pine, hundreds of years old and still growing. In the high elevations of California's White Mountains, where the tule elk and wild mustangs range, there are bristlecones over four thousand years old—some say the oldest living things on the face of the earth. Years ago, I'd made one of the better decisions of my life while lying under such a pine; today I'd been hoping this tree would yield evidence that would help me identify a killer.

No such luck.

After a time I turned away and, still holding the pine cone, retraced my steps to my rented Jeep. I tossed the cone on the passenger's seat, got in, and cranked up the air conditioning. The temperature was in the mid nineties—August heat. I eased the vehicle over the rocky, sloping ground to the secondary road, bumped along it for two miles, then turned southwest onto Route 168

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toward Big Pine, a town of 1,350 nestled in a valley between the Whites and the John Muir Wilderness Area. My motel was on the wide main street, a homey place with a tree-shaded lawn and picnic tables. No high-speed Internet access or other amenities that my operatives at McCone Investigations would have deemed necessities, but plenty good enough for their boss.

I tell my operatives I believe in the simple life. They claim I'm living in the Dark Ages.

Dark Ages, indeed. I had a cell phone, which I took out as soon as I entered my unit and dialed the agency in San Francisco. Ted Smalley, our office manager, sounded relieved when he heard my voice. That morning I'd flown down to Bishop, some fifteen miles north of here, in the Cessna 170B I jointly owned with my significant other, Hy Ripinsky; Ted, ever nervous about what he called my "dangerous hobby," had probably been fretting all day.

"Shar, it's after five o'clock. Where are you?" he asked.

"The motel in Big Pine."

"Why didn't you check in with me from the airport? I've been waiting—"

"There was somebody at the airport who offered me a ride to the dealer I'm renting a car from, so I couldn't take the time. Then I had to stop by the local sheriff's substation to let them know I'd be working in the area, check in here, and— Why am I explaining all this to you?"

"I don't know. Why are you?"

"Sometimes you remind me of my mother."

"God help me. She's a nice lady, but . . ."

"Yeah. So what's going on there?"

"Quiet day, except for the trouble with the UPS guy."

"Trouble?"

"You don't want to know."

"Probably not. Is Mick in?" Mick Savage, my nephew and chief computer expert.

"No, he left for the day, but he said to tell you he e-mailed the files on the research job you assigned him."

Which I would access on my laptop—another rebuttal to the claim that the boss was living in the Dark Ages.

An MWA Grand Master and PWA Lifetime Achievement Award winner, Marcia Muller is generally cited as the first author whose fiction featured a contemporary female private eye. That P.I., Sharon McCone, who debuted in *Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1977), stars in this new story. Together with her husband, Bill Pronzini, Marcia Muller is an honoree of this year's Bouchercon Mystery Convention.

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❖ ❖ ❖

I read through the files Mick had sent me, then walked down to a steakhouse I'd spotted on the way in. After dinner I went back to the motel and sat at one of the picnic tables, enjoying the cool of the evening and planning a course of action for the next day. The air was sweet with sage and dry grass; crickets chorused in a field behind the motel, and somewhere far off, a dog was barking. I felt relaxed, mellow, even; it was good to get out of the city.

The case I was working had been brought to me by Glenn Solomon, a criminal-defense attorney who threw a lot of business my way. His client, Tom Worthington, had been indicted here in Inyo County for the brutal murder of his lover, Darya Adams. Worthington was a wealthy man, an olive rancher from over near Fresno; it was natural he would turn to one of the stars of San Francisco's legal community for his defense.

I thought back to the briefing Glenn had given me in his office high atop Embarcadero Four the previous afternoon.

"Tom Worthington is a family man," he'd begun, folding his hands over the well-tailored expanse of his stomach. "Wife, two college-age children. Good reputation. No indications that he's ever strayed before. Darya Adams, he apparently couldn't resist. Former beauty queen—Miss California, I believe—and widowed. Ran a tourist boutique at Mammoth Lakes. They met when he was on a ski trip there. Before long, they were meeting on a regular basis at a country cabin he bought for her outside Chelsea."

I looked up from the notes I was taking. "Where's Chelsea? I've never heard of it."

"You know Big Pine, Inyo County?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. One of Hy's friends used to have a cabin in the mountains near there."

"Well, Chelsea is a wide place on the road some seven miles into the hills above Big Pine."

"Okay, now, the murder . . . ?"

"As close as the medical examiner could pinpoint it, it occurred on July thirty-first. Worthington and Adams had met at the cabin on the twenty-eighth, according to the employee who was minding the boutique in her absence. When Adams didn't return on August first as scheduled, the employee called the cabin, received no answer, then asked the sheriff to check. Place was closed up. On August third, a hiker came across Adams's body in the foothills of the White Mountains several miles from Big Pine. She'd been beaten and strangled. There were signs that the body had been moved there from the place she was killed, but the sheriff's department hasn't been able to determine where that was."

"And they're calling this a crime of passion, perpetrated by your client?"

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"Right. One of Darya Adams's friends claimed she was fed up with the arrangement and had threatened to go to his wife if he didn't initiate divorce proceedings. He claims that wasn't true."

"What's the evidence pointing to Worthington?"

Glenn shifted in his chair, reached for the bottled water on the desk.

"Two pieces. One, a key chain near the body, containing a miniature of his Safeway Rewards Club card—you know, the ones they give you so if you lose your keys, whoever finds them can turn them in to the store, and they'll call you. And two, a pine cone in the bed of Worthington's truck."

"A *pine cone?*"

"A bristlecone, from the tree Adams's body was found under."

"How do they know it was from that particular tree?"

"Ah, my friend, that's where it gets interesting. Human beings, as you know, can be identified by their DNA. Animals, too. But are you aware that plants also have DNA?"

"No."

"Well, they do, and, as with humans, the DNA of one plant is unlike the DNA of any other."

"Wait a minute—you're saying they ran a DNA test on a pine cone?"

"They did, and it came up a match for those on the tree."

I paused for a moment, letting that sink in. "So what do you expect me to do with this? DNA is a conclusive test."

"Oh, there's no doubt the cone in Tom Worthington's truck came from the place where Darya Adams was found. No doubt it was his key ring near the body. But he insists he's innocent, that she was alive when he left for home the morning of July thirty-first. Says he'd misplaced the key ring at the cabin during a previous visit. Says he doesn't know how the cone came to be in the truck."

"I can see someone planting the keys, but it seems far-fetched that someone would be knowledgeable and clever enough to plant that pine cone."

"Not really. D'you watch any of those true-crime shows on TV?"

"No. They resemble my real life too closely."

"Well, I watch them, and so do millions of others. On July fifteenth, just two weeks before Darya Adams's murder, *Case Closed* did a segment in which a murder conviction hinged on DNA testing of seed pods."

"So someone could've gotten the idea of planting the pine cone from the show."

"Right."

"And you believe Tom Worthington's being truthful with you?"

"I do. My instincts don't lie."

"That's good enough for me."

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"Then what I expect you to do, my friend, should be clear: Find out who left that key ring near the body, and the cone in Worthington's truck. When you do, we'll have our line of defense: Darya Adams's real murderer."

As full dark settled in, I returned to my motel room and again looked over the files Mick had sent me. Background on Tom Worthington and Darya Adams. Background on friends and associates, scattered throughout Inyo and Fresno counties. Tomorrow I'd begin interviewing them, starting with those in the Big Pine area, and then visit Worthington at the county jail in Independence.

Finding a lead to Darya Adams's killer wasn't going to be easy. Inyo is California's third largest county—over ten thousand square miles, encompassing mountains, volcanic wasteland, timber, and desert. Its relatively small communities are scattered far and wide. In addition to its size, the county has a reputation for harboring a strange and often violent population. People vanish into the desert; bodies turn up in old mine shafts; bars are shot up by disgruntled customers. It's not uncommon for planes carrying drugs from south of the border to land at isolated airstrips; desert rats and prospectors and cults with bizarre beliefs hole up in nearly inaccessible canyons. I'd have no shortage of potential suspects here.

Too bad my visit to the bristlecone pine under which Darya Adams died hadn't offered a blinding flash of inspiration.

The red sun over the mountains told me the day was going to be hot. I dressed accordingly, in shorts and a tank top, with a loose-weave shirt for protection against the sun. After a big breakfast at a nearby cafe—best to fortify myself since I didn't know when the next opportunity to eat would present itself—I set off for the offices of Ace Realty, a block off the main street.

According to my background checks, Jeb Barkley, the agent who had handled the sale of the cabin near Chelsea last year, was an old friend of Tom Worthington's, had played football with him at Fresno State. A big man with a round, balding head that looked too small for his body, he was at his desk when I arrived. The other desks were unoccupied and dust-covered; business must not be good.

Barkley greeted me, brought coffee, then sat in his chair, leaning forward, hands clasped on the desktop, a frown furrowing his otherwise baby-smooth brow. "I sure hope you can do something to help Tom, Ms. McCone," he said.

"I'm going to try. Did you see him on his last visit?"

"Oh no. He and Darya . . . they liked their privacy."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

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"Couple of months ago. He came alone, to go fishing, and when he got to the cabin he discovered he didn't have his keys. So he called me and I drove out to let him in with the spare we keep on file here."

That would support Worthington's claim that he'd misplaced the keys that had been found near Adams's body. "How did he seem?"

"Seem? Oh . . . " Barkley considered, the furrows in his brow deepening. "I'd say he was just Tom. Cheerful. Glad to be there. He asked if I'd like to go fishing with him, but I couldn't get away."

"Mr. Barkley, when Tom Worthington bought the cabin, was it clear to you that he was buying it for Darya Adams?"

"From the beginning. I mean, they looked at a number of properties together. And the offer and final papers were drawn up in her name, as a single woman."

"As an old friend of Tom's, how did you feel about the transaction?"

"I don't understand."

"Tom Worthington was cheating on his wife. Buying property for another woman. How did that make you feel?"

He hesitated, looking down at his clasped hands. "Ms. McCone," he said after a moment, "Tom has had a lot of trouble with his wife. A lot of trouble with those kids of his, too. Darya was a nice woman, and I figured he deserved a little happiness in his life. It wasn't as if he was just fooling around, either. They were serious about each other."

"Serious enough that he would leave his family for her?"

"He said he was thinking of it."

"But so far he hadn't taken any steps toward a divorce?"

"Not that I know of."

"Let me ask you this, Mr. Barkley: Are you convinced of Tom Worthington's innocence?"

"I am."

"Any ideas about who might have killed Darya Adams?"

"I've given that some thought. There're a lot of weird characters hanging out in the hills around Chelsea. Screamin' Mike, for one."

"Who's he?"

"Headcase, kind of a hermit. Has a shack not too far from Tom and Darya's cabin. Comes to town once a month when his disability check arrives at general delivery. Cashes it at Gilley's Saloon, gets drunk, and then he starts screaming nonsense at the top of his voice. How he got his name."

"Is he dangerous to others?"

"Not so far. Ed Gilley runs him off, he goes back to his shack and sobers up. But you never know."

I made a note about Screamin' Mike. "Anyone else you can think of?"

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"There's a cult up one of the canyons—Children of the Perpetual Life. Some of their members've had run-ins with the sheriff, and a couple of years ago one of their women disappeared, was never found. Maybe Ed Gilley could help you; running a saloon, he's hooked in with the local gossip."

I noted the cult's and Gilley's names. "Well, thank you, Mr. Barkley," I said. "When I spoke with your local sheriff's deputy yesterday, he told me they have no objection to my examining the cabin, and I have Mr. Worthington's permission as well. Has he contacted you about giving me the keys?"

"Yes. But why do you want to go there? If the sheriff's department didn't find anything—"

"Even so, there may be something that will give me a lead."

He rose, then hesitated. "The cabin—it's kind of hard to find. How about I drive you there, let you in myself?"

At first I balked at the idea, but I sensed a reserve in Jeb Barkley; he might volunteer something useful in a less structured situation. "Okay," I said. "I'd appreciate it."

We went outside to a parking area behind the real-estate office, and Barkley unlocked the doors of a blue Subaru Outback whose left side was badly scratched. He saw me looking at it and said, "Damn kids. Keyed it while the wife and I were at the movies last week."

"I guess kids in small towns aren't any different from those in big cities." I slid into the passenger seat, wincing as the hot vinyl burned the back of my thighs.

"Makes me glad I never had any." Barkley eased his big body behind the wheel.

"You mentioned that Tom Worthington had trouble with his children."

"Yeah. Jeannie, the older one, got into drugs in high school. Tom had her in and out of schools for troubled teens, but it didn't do any good. She's out on her own now, only shows up when she wants money. The boy, Kent, has . . . I guess they call them anger-management problems. Did jail time for beating up his girlfriend. He's in college now and doing well, but Tom says he's still an angry young man."

I made a mental note to find out more about Worthington's troubled offspring. "And his wife—what kind of trouble did he have with her?"

". . . I'm not sure I should be talking about that."

"You'll save me from having to ask him."

"Well, okay, then. Betsy, that's the wife's name, she drinks. It's gotten so that she doesn't go out of the house, just drinks from morning till night. Wine after breakfast, the hard stuff in the

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afternoon, more wine during and after dinner. And then she passes out. They don't have much of a life together."

"Do you think she knew about Darya Adams?"

"Doubt the woman knows much about anything. I mean, when you're in the bag all the time . . ."

"I hear you."

Barkley drove north on the highway for about three miles, then looped off onto a secondary road that twisted and branched, twisted again, and began climbing into the hills between rocky outcroppings to which pines and sage and manzanita stubbornly clung. The road flattened briefly, and a scattering of buildings appeared—grocery store, propane firm, diner, and several small private homes.

"Chelsea," Barkley said, and turned into a side road.

"Not much to it."

"Nope. Of course, it suited Tom and Darya. As I said, they liked their privacy."

"Why here, though? Why didn't they buy a place nearer to Mammoth Lakes, where she had her shop?"

"Darya wasn't comfortable with that. She's . . . she was a prominent businesswoman, active in civic organizations and charities. Until Tom could see his way clear to divorcing Betsy, Darya preferred to keep their relationship secret."

"Exactly why couldn't he see his way clear?"

Barkley glanced at me, lips twisting wryly. "Money—what else? Community-property state, lots of assets at stake. He was trying to figure out a way to minimize the divorce's impact on his holdings. I've been advising him how to do that."

"You mean you've been advising him on a way to hide his assets."

Barkley shrugged, turned his eyes back on the road.

After about a mile, he braked and made a sharp right turn into a graveled driveway. Clumps of dry grass stubbled the ground to either side, and ahead, tucked under tall pines and backing up to a rocky hill, stood the cabin. It was small, of stone and logs, with a wide porch running along the front and a dormer window peeking out from under its eaves. Barkley pulled the car up near the steps.

I got out and climbed to the porch. It was refreshingly cool there. Barkley followed, taking out a set of keys, and opened the front door. The interior of the cabin was even cooler.

The main floor was one big room: kitchen with a breakfast bar separating it from an informal dining area, sitting area centering around a stone fireplace. Rustic furnishings, the kind you expect in a vacation place. Stuffed animal heads on the walls; I could feel their glassy eyes watching me.

"Worthington's a hunter?" I asked.

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"What? No, the place came furnished."

A spiral staircase led up to a loft. I climbed it, found two bedrooms with a connecting bath. In the larger of the two, the bed was unmade, the blanket and sheets tangled. In the bathroom, towels were draped crookedly over their bars; a silk robe in a red-and-black floral pattern lay on the edge of the tub.

I thought about the vacation place Hy and I owned on the Mendocino coast. At the end of every visit, we took time to tidy it, so we'd be greeted by a clean home when we returned. Tom Worthington claimed he had left the cabin on the morning of July thirty-first—apparently delegating the cleanup to Darya. Darya was due back at her shop in Mammoth Lakes on August first, and she probably would have wanted to go home and get settled in the night before, but there was no sign she'd been preparing to depart. I went down to the kitchen. Dirty dishes were piled in the sink, and a trash receptacle was overflowing. Barkley stood at the counter, his back to me, looking out a greenhouse window.

"Poor hummingbirds," he said. "Their feeder's empty. I think I'll fill it." He reached into a cabinet next to the sink as I went back to the living area.

There were two grass-cloth placemats and pewter salt-and-pepper shakers on the table, and the chairs had been neatly pushed in. The cushions on the sofa in front of the fireplace were rumpled, but I saw no books, magazines, or anything else of a personal nature. There were no knickknacks, photographs, or pictures on the wall.

Who are you people? I thought, standing by the fireplace. *Or, in Darya's case, who were you?* With the exception of the disarray upstairs and in the kitchen, the cabin might have been a set for a TV movie. I couldn't begin to fathom how the woman had died unless I knew how she had lived. And—with due apologies to Glenn's instincts—I couldn't fully assess Tom Worthington's guilt or innocence until I knew what kind of man he was.

I decided to take a run up Highway 395 to Mammoth Lakes, in Mono County, right away. I'd speak to Adams's employee there. Then, in the afternoon, I'd drive down to the Inyo County jail in Independence.

When Jeb Barkley dropped me off at my rental car, I called the office and asked Mick to start background searches on Tom Worthington's son and daughter. Then I phoned Darya Adams's employee, Kathy Bledsoe, and made an appointment to meet her at Adams's shop, High Desert Mementoes. As I drove northwest on 395, I reviewed what I knew of the woman.

Kathy, according to Mick's files, was an artist, in her mid thirties, around Darya's age. She'd enjoyed some success selling her

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landscapes through a gallery in Mammoth Lakes. For a number of years she'd been employed as a ski instructor at one of the area's resorts, but had quit in order to devote more time to her painting; it must have been the right move, for a review of a showing of her works at the gallery last year predicted that her career was due to take off.

Mammoth Lakes struck me as an upscale community for Mono County. Hy owned a ranch to the north, near Tufa Lake, that he'd inherited from his stepfather, and I was accustomed to the small towns and open countryside of that area. But here you had good motels (presumably equipped with all the amenities my operatives would find desirable), a variety of restaurants, and shopping centers. A lot of shopping centers. I located Darya Adams's establishment in one of them, not far from 395. Its windows displayed a better class of merchandise than usually found in tourist shops: obsidian sculptures, lava rock, dried desert plants, coffee-table books. The sign on the door said the shop was closed, but when I tapped on the glass, a slender, dark-haired woman admitted me and identified herself as Bledsoe.

When we were seated in a small office behind the selling floor, she said, "Truthfully, I don't know what I can tell you that might help Tom. I mean, I was just here minding the store when Darya . . . Well, I just don't know."

"Basically I'm after background. I take it you knew about Ms. Adams's relationship with Mr. Worthington?"

"*Knew* about it? I introduced them."

"Tell me about that."

"Tom was a friend of my former husband's. They'd known each other forever, fished together. About two years ago, I had an opening at the Lakes Gallery—I'm a painter, landscapes, mainly. Tom was up skiing and came to the show; Darya was there, too. They hit it off, and the rest, as they say, is history." Her dark eyes clouded. "A good history, until last week."

"The relationship was harmonious, then?"

"Very. Darya never mentioned so much as a harsh word."

"So she was open about it with you?"

"Of course. Why d'you ask?"

"I've heard she tried to keep it a secret."

"From people who had no business knowing, yes. But not from me."

"Was Tom planning to divorce his wife?"

"Eventually."

"And Darya had no problem with the delay?"

Kathy Bledsoe smiled faintly. "If anything, she was in favor of waiting. Darya was very independent—she'd had to be, since her husband—a marine—was killed on a military training exercise

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when she was twenty-three. Darya loved Tom, but I sensed she was having trouble getting used to the idea of giving up some of that independence. The cabin was a sort of compromise for them, a place where they could give living together a trial run."

"Have you ever been to the cabin?"

"Only once. The boutique was closed because some repairs were being done, and Darya wanted to go down to the cabin because she had an appointment with a plumber who was going to install a new hot-water heater. But she didn't want to be there alone, so she asked me along. I had a good time." Bledsoe's eyes filled with tears. "God, it's so damn unfair!"

I waited till she'd gotten herself under control, then asked, "Why didn't she want to go alone? Because of the isolation?"

"No. Her house here is fairly isolated, and she'd never had a problem with that." Bledsoe frowned. "Now that you mention it, I remember thinking it strange at the time. She seemed on edge the whole time we were there."

Interesting. "Think about that weekend. Did anything unusual happen? Anyone drop by, or call, besides the plumber?"

She thought, shook her head.

"Did Ms. Adams ever mention a man called Screamin' Mike?"

"I'm sure I'd remember if she had."

"Anyone else in the area?"

"No."

"But you're sure she was on edge that weekend."

"Yes, I'm sure. Darya was afraid of something or someone down there."

Tom Worthington was a handsome man. Even in the jail jumpsuit, his eyes shadowed and puffy from lack of sleep, his gray-frosted dark hair touseled, he would have turned female heads. We sat in a little visiting room, guard outside, and went over everything he'd told the sheriff's people and Glenn Solomon. Then we went over it again; I found no inconsistencies.

"Mr. Worthington," I said, "were you and Ms. Adams getting along at the time of her death?"

"Better than ever. That last weekend we spent together was . . . well, I'll never forget it."

"I understand you were planning to leave your wife, marry Ms. Adams."

"I had hoped to."

"And the delay was because of your marital situation?"

He rubbed his hand across his stubbled chin, nodded. "My wife . . . has her problems. I was trying to find a way to leave the marriage without exacerbating them."

"She drinks."

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" . . . Yes. I've been trying to convince her to get help, so has our family doctor. Until she does . . . " He spread his hands.

"I understand. Is your wife the sort of person who becomes violent when she drinks?"

"Betsy? God no! She's constantly sedated."

"Perhaps she's drinking to sublimate anger?"

"I don't . . . oh, I see where you're going. No, Ms. McCone, Betsy didn't find out about Darya and kill her. She hasn't left the house, except when I've forced her to accompany me, in five years. And those occasions were not successful ones."

"What about your children—did they know about your affair with Ms. Adams?"

"Jeannie, my daughter, didn't. She's too caught up in her drugged-out little world. Kent did. He's visited at the cabin, and he liked Darya. She had a calming effect on him."

"I understand he has anger-management problems."

"Yes. Anger toward his mother, primarily. But he's working on them."

"Mr. Worthington, are you aware that Ms. Adams was afraid of something or someone? And that it was connected with your cabin?"

"Darya? Afraid?"

I explained what Kathy Bledsoe had told me.

Worthington shook his head in a bewildered way. "Why didn't she confide in me? Or in Jeb? If somebody'd been bothering her while she was down there, he would've taken care of them."

"Jeb's a good friend?"

"The best. He'd do anything for me. Or Darya."

"He claims he was advising you on how to conserve your assets in the event of a divorce."

Worthington had been grim-faced through most of our meeting, but now he smiled. "Jeb? *He's* the one who needs advice when it comes to financial matters."

"Why d'you say that?"

"Jeb nearly lost his shirt in a real-estate deal a couple of years ago. High-risk, and I warned him not to get into it, but he wouldn't listen. Now he's got a big balloon payment coming due, and he can't cover it. Jeb's a sweet guy, but . . . " He spread his hands. "He introduced Darya and me, you know."

"I thought Kathy Bledsoe did."

"We deliberately gave her that impression. I went up to meet Darya at an opening at the Lakes Gallery; turned out Kathy was the artist. I was taken aback to see an old acquaintance, and find out she worked for Darya. Darya sensed my discomfort and played along when Kathy introduced us. But no, I met Darya about six months before that at Jeb's house in Big Pine."

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"And how long had Jeb known her?"

"His whole life. Darya was his cousin."

"No, Shar," Mick said over the phone. "Jeb Barkley has no cousin. And neither does Darya Adams."

"Are you sure?"

"My computer doesn't lie."

"Why not? Mine does, all the time."

"That's because you don't use the right databases."

That was probably true. I sighed.

"Shar? Anything else?"

"Yes. I need deep background on Jeb Barkley and Darya Adams. Specifically, if either has a criminal record."

The scenario that came together in my mind as I drove back to Big Pine was a disturbing one. Jeb Barkley had no cousin; Darya Adams had none, either. But Tom Worthington was under the impression they were related.

Barkley had introduced Adams to him as his cousin. Why?

Wealthy man with an unhappy home life. Young, attractive single woman. Old friend who has lost money in a real-estate deal and has a large balloon payment coming up in a year and a half. He introduces the woman as his cousin. The wealthy man is induced to leave his wife for her. The woman then has a community-property stake in those assets—which she can share with her "cousin."

Not cousins—partners in crime.

But something had gone wrong.

My phone buzzed. I pulled to the side of the road, picked up. Mick.

"Shar, I called Adah Joslyn at the SFPD."

Adah, an inspector on the Homicide detail, and a good friend. "And?"

"She accessed Barkley's and Adams's criminal records for me. The two of them—Adams was Darya Dunn then, her maiden name before she married the marine—were arrested over in Nevada fifteen years ago on a bunko charge. Barkley did time; from what I'm reading between the lines, he took the rap for Adams."

"Why didn't this show up in your original backgrounding?"

A silence. Then, reproachfully, "You didn't specify *deep* backgrounding, Shar. Criminal records're hard to access unless you want to use contacts like Adah. And you've warned me not to abuse the privilege."

I sighed. "Well, it didn't occur to me to go deep on an old friend who sold them a house—or on the victim."

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"Which leads us to private investigator's lesson number one—"

"Right. Suspect everyone." I thanked Mick and broke the connection. Pulled back onto the road.

Jeb Barkley finds his former partner in crime running a boutique up in Mammoth Lakes. He needs money badly, and his friend Tom Worthington has refused to help him out. Darya is attractive, just the sort of woman who might attract a man like Worthington, who is trapped in a dead marriage. So Barkley reminds Adams of the old days and puts pressure on her to begin a relationship with Worthington, with an eye to getting her hands on his assets. Adams agrees, because she values her reputation and position in her community. But then Adams and Barkley have a falling-out, maybe because she'd actually fallen in love with her victim. Now she's afraid of someone down at the cabin.

Barkley, who demonstrated this morning that he was familiar with the place—so much so that he even knew where she kept the hummingbird food—and who also had a set of keys.

And she'd had good reason to be afraid. He'd found her alone on July thirty-first, they'd quarreled, and he'd killed her. Then he'd planted evidence to implicate his friend.

Now what I needed was concrete evidence to implicate him.

As I drove the rest of the way to Big Pine, I kept thinking about the tree that Darya Adams's body had been found under. On impulse, when I reached the intersection of Routes 395 and 168, I turned east into the foothills.

The bristlecone stood alone on the rocky slope, clinging to the poor, coarse soil. I got out of the Jeep and walked around it, ducked under its low-hanging branches. Even though the sun was dipping below the ridge to the west, it felt uncomfortably warm there, and the air was dusty enough to make me sneeze. I went out the other side where the branches were bent and sheared off, sap congealing on their broken tips.

Emergency vehicles, I thought. They did this damage getting the body out.

Or . . .

I took out my cell phone, called the local sheriff's department substation. The officer I'd spoken with the previous afternoon, who had been one of the first at the murder scene, took a look at the official photographs and confirmed my suspicion.

"Our people did some damage after the photos were taken," he told me, "but the tree was already ripped up on that side, probably by your client's truck when he dumped the body."

"Was there damage to Mr. Worthington's truck? Chipped paint, scratches?"

A pause. "I don't see any photos or mention of it."

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"In your opinion, if his truck was scratched, would the paint contain traces of the tree's DNA?"

"Well, I'm not a lab technician, Ms. McCone, but I'll hazard a guess that it would."

"Thanks. I'll be in touch."

Jeb Barkley's house was on a quiet side street in Big Pine: a small stucco bungalow on a small lot with a patch of lawn out front. A sprinkler was throwing out lazy arcs of water, and light glowed behind blinds in the windows. Barkley's Outback stood before the closed doors of a single-car garage. I parked down the block and waited until it was full dark before I approached.

Armed with a paint scraper and one of the plastic bags I'd earlier purchased at a hardware store, I crept up to the passenger side of the car. I switched on my pencil flashlight and, holding it between my teeth, began removing flecks of paint from the scratched area on the door. When I had a respectable amount, I sealed the bag.

I glanced at the house. No visible activity there. Slowly I began to move around the car, shining the beam over it. Nothing distinctive about the tires—and the sheriff's people hadn't been able to take any impressions at the scene, anyway. A few more scratches on the front panel, nothing lodged under the bumper.

The outside vent below the windshield, maybe. He would have removed anything obvious that was caught there, probably had washed the car, but deep down inside . . .

Yes!

I glanced over at the house. Still no activity. I fumbled in my bag for the pouch where I keep miscellaneous objects—chapstick, nail clippers, tweezers for the splinters I'm always getting. Took out the tweezers and fished around in the vent, until I found a slender wood fragment.

Ten to one it came from the bristlecone pine. There was another fragment lodged down there, but I'd leave it for the sheriff's technicians.

I slipped back to the Jeep, headed for the substation.

Overconfidence, I thought, that's what always brings them down. Jeb Barkley hadn't counted on anyone looking into his past and discovering his connection with Darya Adams. He hadn't bothered to have his car repainted because who would suspect him—a small-town real-estate agent, and Tom Worthington's friend—of killing anyone? He hadn't even bothered to conceal from me his knowledge of where things were kept in the cabin.

All of that, and irrefutable DNA evidence as the clincher.

Glenn Solomon was going to love this. Maybe he'd even pay a bonus for my getting results in record time. ●

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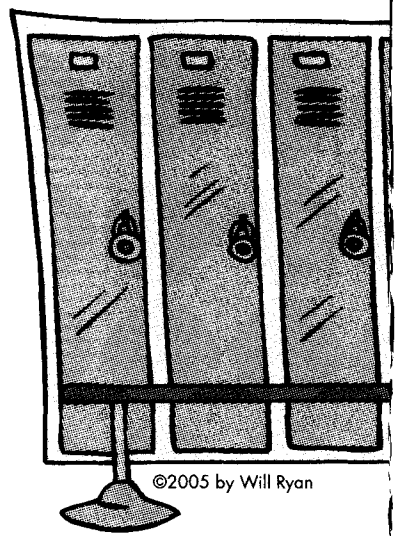
Like, Clueless!

Overheard outside the girls' locker room at River Heights High and faithfully transcribed

by Will Ryan

So that new girl? She's, like, clueless!
Just one look an' you're all: Hey!
I mean, who'd be seen with hair like that!
So, like, Yesterday! Okay?
An' she dresses? Like some loser?
Who, like, never saw a *mall*?
An' that *boat* she drives? A "roadster"?
I mean what's with that! It's all
Puh-*leez*! Weird retro creep-out!
I mean, gag me with a fork!
An' she's always acting . . . snoopy?
Like some total weirdo dork?
An' her friends? Don't get me started!
They're so gross I'm all like: Ewwww!
She should get a clue or *some*thing—
That ca-*lu*eless Nancy Drew!



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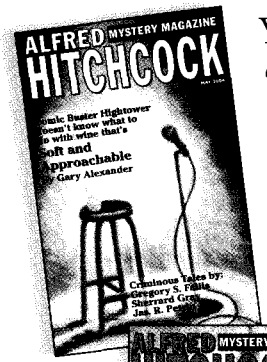

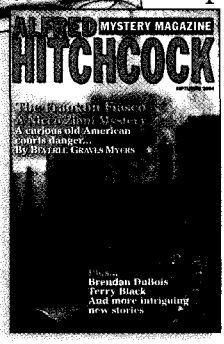

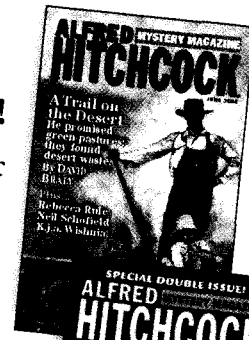

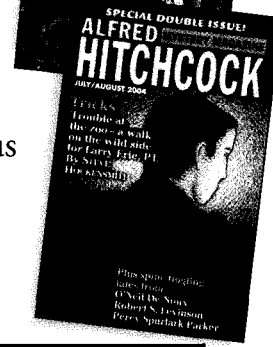

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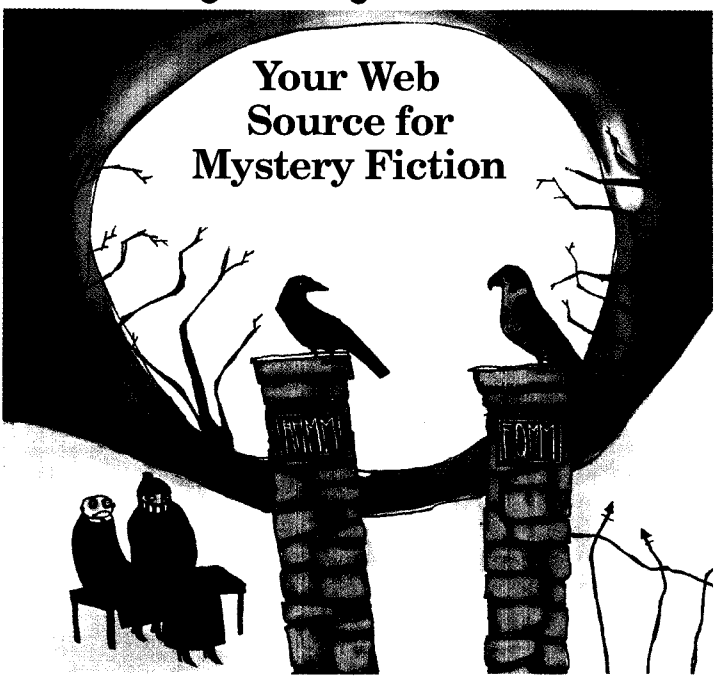

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